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**Tewkesbury Abbey, the Despenser Mausoleum**

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# Tewkesbury Abbey: The Despenser Mausoleum

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UP TO the 14th century, Tewkesbury abbey was still essentially the massive Norman church initiated by Robert FitzHamon. During that century it was dramatically transformed and took on the rich, ornate appearance with which we are now familiar. The east end was totally remodelled on a plan that is probably the most complicated version ever produced in England of the ambulatory with radiating chapels scheme, in that no two chapels are the same design. Within it arose the collection of carved tombs and effigies which today is second only to the royal ensemble in Westminster abbey. The same period saw the impenetrable Norman walls opened up throughout the church by the insertion of elaborate Decorated windows, and the whole edifice was crowned with the series of incredibly elaborate vaults for which it is justly famous.

Yet despite the impressive nature of this transformation, and its recognized importance in any study of 14th-century art and architecture, practically nothing precise is known about the dates of the work. The abbey chronicles fall silent in 1263, and the only date we have in the next century relating to the fabric is Rushforth's heraldic evidence for the glazing of the choir clerestory glass between 1340 and 1344.<sup>1</sup> This paucity of documentation seems all the more ironic when one considers the case of Tewkesbury's sister abbey, St Peter's at Gloucester. The Norman church there was about contemporary with the building of Tewkesbury, and in many respects their designs were so alike that they were virtually interchangeable: both were built on the same plan, with a distinctive type of polygonal ambulatory, and both naves are still distinguished by their use of exceptionally tall drum piers. They remained very similar in appearance for almost two centuries until, like Tewkesbury, the east end of Gloucester was completely remodelled in the course of the 14th century. However, unlike Tewkesbury, all the work at Gloucester in this period is documented to the nearest year, thanks largely to the survival of the abbey chronicle.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the importance of the east end as the earliest developed example of Perpendicular style, and its association with the body of king Edward II, has produced a considerable quantity of writings over the past twenty-five years about the nature of the work and the workshops likely to have been involved in it.<sup>3</sup> Much of this research (though by no means all of it) has inclined to the view that the overall designer was a London mason, and the author's own recent research has tended to confirm this.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, come the 14th century, Gloucester and Tewkesbury, twin sisters for over two hundred years, suddenly appear to part company in their styles, importance, and documentation. The former is seen as basking in Court favour because of its royal burial, and rebuilding in the most up-to-date

1. G. McN. Rushforth, 'The Glass in the Quire Clerestory of Tewkesbury Abbey', *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, XLVI (1924).

2. W. H. Hart (ed.), *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae* (Rolls Series, 1863).

3. A case for a Court mason as the dominant factor in the design of Gloucester has been made by M. Hastings, *St. Stephen's Chapel* (Cambridge 1955), Ch. IX, and, more specifically, by J. H. Harvey (e.g., *The Gothic World*, London 1950, 93-4, and particularly 'The Origin of the Perpendicular Style', 135-7 and 150-2, in *Studies in Building History in honour of B. H. St. J. O'Neill*, ed. by E. M. Jope, London 1961). The claims for the primacy of West Country elements in the design are represented especially by N. Pevsner, 'Bristol, Troyes and Gloucester', *Architectural Review*, CXIII (Feb. 1953), 89-98, and H. Bock, 'The Exeter Rood Screen', *Architectural Review*, CXXX (Nov. 1961), 313-17, and *Der Decorated Style* (Heidelberg 1962).

4. R. K. Morris, *Decorated Architecture in Herefordshire* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1972), especially 357-9. The main point is that there is nothing resembling the most characteristic mouldings of the choir and transepts at Gloucester in the churches of the West Midlands and South-West before the second half of the century.

style of the Court in London, which was about to become the national style of England. Whereas the latter, in comparison and largely by default, is thought of as a thoroughly provincial work, something of an eccentricity, significant mainly because it is one of the most extreme examples of the Decorated style—a style, however, that was all but over. This contrast has not been lessened by the fact that Gloucester became the seat of a bishopric at the Reformation, whereas Tewkesbury was relegated to the status of a parish church. Indeed, this final contrast in their fortunes is probably partly responsible for diverting the attentions of most modern scholars towards Gloucester rather than Tewkesbury.

The material in this paper was assembled to help redress this state of affairs, and at least establish some form of documentation for the work at Tewkesbury. For such dating can be ascertained once it is realized that the remodelling is primarily associated with Edward II's favourite, Hugh le Despenser the younger, and not with his widow, Eleanor, and their son, Hugh, as is often stated. The latter were responsible only for the completion of the work. To demonstrate these attributions more fully, it will be necessary to begin with a brief outline of Despenser's career.<sup>5</sup>

The story of his rise to power stems from his marriage in 1306 to Eleanor de Clare, a grandchild of Edward I, and the eldest daughter of Gilbert de Clare II, the powerful earl of Gloucester, whose estates were centred on Tewkesbury. Gilbert had died in 1295, and when his only son, young Gilbert III, was killed at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, Hugh eventually inherited the manor of Tewkesbury through his wife. This did not take place, however, until 1317 at the earliest, apparently because of legal complications caused by the birth of a short-lived child to Gilbert's widow. What is important is that Hugh failed to inherit the title of earl of Gloucester,<sup>6</sup> and the De Clare estates (mainly in South Wales) were divided between himself and Hugh Audley and Roger D'Amory, the husbands of Eleanor's two younger sisters. Not to be outdone, he sought to reunite all the estates under his rule, using his position as chamberlain of the royal household, combined with military force where necessary. He achieved considerable success, particularly with Audley's portion of the inheritance, but in doing so he aroused a powerful coalition of the Marcher lords against him, who overran his territories and forced Edward II at a parliament in July 1321, to send him and his father into exile. But this was no more than a temporary setback.

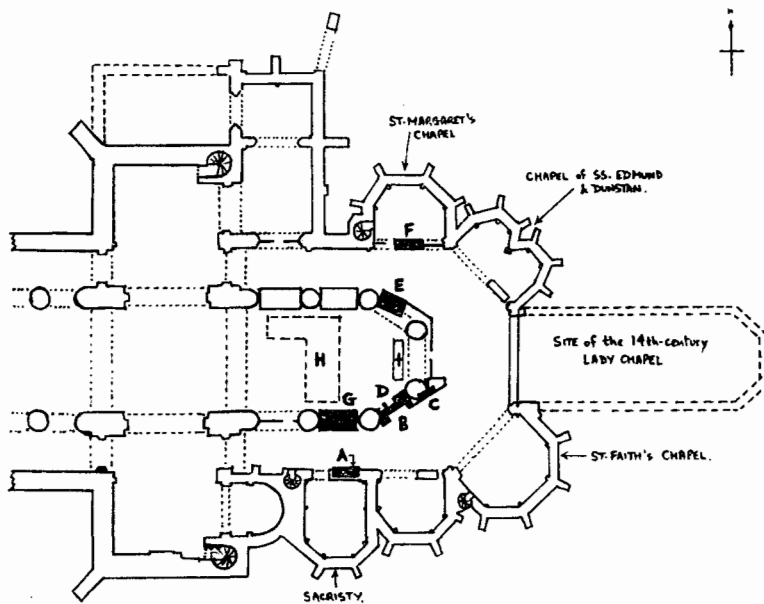
By the end of 1321, the king was in a sufficiently strong position for the Despensers to re-emerge from exile, and in March 1322, the royal forces overthrew the Marcher lords and their northern allies at the battle of Boroughbridge. Most of the ringleaders, notably the king's cousin, Thomas of Lancaster, were executed, whilst others who had not fallen in battle or fled were imprisoned. Of Despenser's brothers-in-law, D'Amory had been killed and Audley was in prison; of his most powerful neighbours on the Welsh Marches, the Mortimers were imprisoned in the Tower and Humphrey Bohun, earl of Hereford, had fallen at Boroughbridge. At another parliament in May, 1322, Despenser received back all his lands and much more besides, and his father became earl of Winchester. He virtually controlled South Wales territorially and, in fact, there was no magnate left in the realm who could stand up to him. His control of the government was unrivalled, and remained so until his downfall in 1326. Even De la Moore, a friend of Edward II, wrote of these years, 'Videbantur pro uno tres jam esse Anglie reges', the third member of the 'triumvirate' being Despenser's father.<sup>7</sup> His wealth in this period was enormous. Between November 1324, and Michaelmas 1326, for example, he deposited no less than £5,735 with the banking family of the Peruzzi alone, and was clearly their most important English client, his deposits even exceeding those of the Papal tax collectors in England.

5. This outline is drawn mainly from the following: the account of Despenser's life in G. E. Cokayne, *The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, and Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom* (new ed., London 1910–1959); M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century* (Oxford 1959); and J. C. Davies, *The Baronial Opposition to Edward II* (1918, new impression in 1967).

6. The title in fact went to Ralph de Monthermer (d. 1325) in right of his first wife, Joan of Acre, the widow of Gilbert de Clare II.

7. A. T. Bannister (ed.), *The Register of Adam de Orleton, Bishop of Hereford, A.D. 1317–27* (Hereford 1907), xxv.

The ornate remodelling of Tewkesbury makes sense if it is interpreted against this background of enormous wealth yet lack of a distinguished ancestry or title. It explains, for example, the use of the traditional French scheme of ambulatory and radiating chapels, in contrast to the square east end typical of most English work in this period (FIG. 1). There appear to have been only two relatively recent prototypes in England for the Tewkesbury design—Westminster abbey, the royal church and burial place from the time of Henry III, and the east end of Hailes abbey (1270–7), the



**KEY TO THE MONUMENTS:**

- A. THE "FORTHAMPTON" TOMB RECESS (ACTUALLY ABBOT KEMPSEY?)
- B. TOMB RECESS OF HUGH LE DESPENSER THE YOUNGER, d. 1326.
- C. POSSIBLE TOMB CHEST OF HUGH LE DESPENSER THE YOUNGER.
- D. THE CHOIR SEDILIA.
- E. TOMB OF HUGH, LORD LE DESPENSER, d. 1349, & HIS WIFE, ELIZABETH.
- F. TOMB OF GUY DE BRYAN, THIRD HUSBAND OF ELIZABETH.
- G. TOMB & CHANTRY OF EDWARD LE DESPENSER, d. 1375, HEIR OF HUGH, LORD LE DESPENSER.
- H. THE GRAVES OF THE DE CLARE FAMILY.

FIG. 1. Monuments in the east end of Tewkesbury Abbey.

resting place of Henry's brother, Richard, earl of Cornwall and claimant to the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> Hailes is a particularly likely source of inspiration because of its geographical proximity to Tewkesbury, and also perhaps because the earl of Cornwall's second son, Edmund, who was also buried there, had married Margaret de Clare, the sister of Gilbert II, earl of Gloucester. In other words, it would appear that this form of east end was employed at Tewkesbury because Despenser wished to create a grandiose family mausoleum, based on (and probably intended to outdo) the most illustrious precedents to be found not only locally but anywhere in England.<sup>9</sup>

8. For Hailes, see *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, xxii, 14, 34, 257; xxiii, 45 and 96; xxiv, 126.

9. Doubtless too the monks of Tewkesbury were very pleased to receive a new building that in its elaboration would surpass their prestigious Cistercian neighbour, Hailes, which possessed a relic of the Holy Blood.

This symbolic intent seems equally clear in the stained glass of the choir clerestory. The north window of the west bay is filled with the representations of military figures, one of which is Despenser himself. To his left is Robert FitzHamon, the founder of the abbey and a cousin of the Norman king, William Rufus. Immediately to his right is a De Clare, probably Gilbert I, the first member of that family to assume the title of earl of Gloucester; beyond him is Robert FitzRoy, a son of king Henry I and son-in-law of FitzHamon, the other great benefactor of the abbey in the Norman period and the first lord of the manor of Tewkesbury to bear the title of Gloucester.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Despenser chose to be depicted directly alongside these three particular predecessors—the founder, the first earl, and the first De Clare earl—indicates the way in which the imagery of this church is intended to glorify his name by associating it with his most illustrious forerunners. In the south windows opposite are the other three De Clare earls, along with William la Zouche, who succeeded Despenser as lord of Tewkesbury; this latter figure must be a modification made to the original design in the 1330s, before the execution of the glass, *c.* 1340.

A further aspect of this symbolic glorification is suggested by the disposition of the vaults and their decoration. The bosses of the nave vault unfold the life of Christ, beginning with the Nativity at the west end, and progressing eastwards along the ridge rib through the events on this earth, until by the east end the emphasis of the scenes has shifted to the realm of heaven (the Ascension, Coronation of the Virgin, God in Majesty). The intent of this progression is to suggest to the visitor and the lay congregation in the nave that beyond, in the choir and sanctuary, lies an image of the next world—in fact, an image of Paradise. And this is precisely the imagery we find in the choir vault. The elaborate radiating patterns of ribs which have made this vault so famous, and which have often been likened to giant flowers, are not merely decoration, but may be read as symbolizing the Paradise Garden. In other words, the vault is an early forerunner of later Flamboyant flower vaults like the famous examples at Annaberg or Most in East Germany (PLATE I), where such symbolism has been more commonly observed because, by that date, the image of the Paradise Garden had been thoroughly developed in Flemish and German painting. A contemporary parallel for Tewkesbury would be the elaboration of naturalistic and vegetal motifs in the margins of East Anglian manuscripts, at times almost encircling the page, surrounding the little figures in a garden-like enclosure.

Perhaps the most startling aspect of this symbolism is that the lords of Tewkesbury, including Despenser himself, are depicted in Paradise, and in such a manner that one is left in little doubt that they are to be regarded with extreme sanctity. Their figures in the clerestory windows stand beneath the vault on exactly the same level and scale as the Old Testament prophets, patriarchs and kings in the windows immediately to the east. Thus, the whole building may be seen as a monumental demonstration that, though lacking blue-blood and the title of Gloucester, Despenser was the peer (and more) of any nobleman living or deceased, and the rightful successor of his illustrious forerunners at Tewkesbury.

These considerations allow us to place the beginning of the work with some accuracy. Clearly it cannot antedate his inheritance of the estate about 1317, but it is likely, given the ambitious way he immediately set about seizing the lands of his brothers-in-law, that the scheme was conceived and the plans drawn up before the minor setback of 1321. Perhaps even one season's building campaign took place before that date. But the major part of the work executed in his lifetime must have taken place at the period of his greatest wealth, between regaining his estates in mid-1322 and his downfall in 1326.

Work must have come to an abrupt halt towards the end of 1326, when Roger Mortimer and queen Isabella invaded the country from Holland, and encountered practically no resistance, so many enemies had Despenser made through his rapacious ways. He was captured with the king at Neath in November 1326, brought before Mortimer at Hereford, and hung, drawn and quartered in the same month; his head was put on London Bridge, and his quarters were sent to Bristol, Dover, York, and Newcastle. The king was officially deposed by parliament in January 1327, and by

10. Rushforth, 312-15.

September he was dead, murdered at Berkeley castle; his body was finally laid to rest at Gloucester. For three years Mortimer and queen Isabella ruled the country as selfishly as Despenser had done, until they too were overthrown by the young Edward III in October 1330, and Mortimer was executed.

It is most improbable that any building activity took place at the abbey in these years, for the Despenser estates suffered heavily, like those of other adherents of Edward II, such as Arundel and Bishop Stapledon. In January 1327, for example, the avaricious queen Isabella was granted all the plate, jewels, and movables belonging to Despenser.<sup>11</sup> Before then, in November 1326, his widow, Eleanor, was committed to the Tower, and though she was released and her lands restored in 1328, she was back in the Tower again after marriage to William la Zouche without royal consent. She and La Zouche were pardoned in February 1330, and in December, after the death of Mortimer, Eleanor obtained a royal permit to have her former husband's bones collected and interred in the abbey. Finally, in January 1331, they recovered the manor of Tewkesbury and other lands from Edward III in return for a fine of £10,000 (later reduced to £5,000, and never fully paid during their lifetimes). By 1332, it is evident that La Zouche was right back in royal favour, for he was entrusted with the protection of princess Eleanor on her journey to marry the count of Guelders, and in the next year he was appointed to keep the King's Peace in Wales and the Marches.

All the signs thus point to a resumption of work in the early 1330s, probably in 1331 or 1332. A useful analogy with the progress of the work is afforded by St Stephen's chapel, Westminster, where the records indicate that work came to an end in the winter of 1325-6, after an expensive building campaign in Edward II's later years, and that, following initial preparations in 1331, it began again in earnest in 1332.<sup>12</sup> The work at Tewkesbury must have been continued beyond the deaths of La Zouche and Eleanor in 1337 by Despenser's son and heir, Hugh, for it would appear from the date of glazing of the clerestory glass that the bulk of work on the choir was not complete until about 1340. The remodelling of the nave must also have been finished by that time, because of the close stylistic connections between it and the east end. So the main parts of the great scheme begun by Despenser were brought to completion. Even so, the transept vaults do not appear to have been inserted until after 1350, for their bosses are closely related to work in Hereford cathedral in the 1350s and 1360s,<sup>13</sup> and the crossing vault may date from quite late in the century, for it bears the arms of Guy de Bryan (*d.* 1390), the third husband of Hugh's widow (Hugh died in 1349).

This rather unsettled historical background, with a turbulent break between 1326 and 1330, tallies well with the evidence of the building fabric, which contains all kinds of anomalies and small structural changes. For example, the plinth mouldings of the four surviving apsidal chapels and of the sacristy are the same, as is the projection of the buttresses, indicating that they were all laid out at foundation level at the same time. But above this level, the two northern chapels of St Margaret and SS. Dunstan and Edmund have a different system of set-offs on the buttresses than those on the south side, and also a taller parapet with a more elaborately moulded stringcourse at gutter level: on the south, the chapel of St Faith has a low parapet with a simple scroll stringcourse, whilst the adjoining chapel and the sacristy have neither parapet nor stringcourse (FIG. 1). This is open to two varying interpretations regarding the chronology. Either the two northern chapels were completed externally before the break in 1326, and the southern ones were never properly finished after the resumption of work in the 1330s. Alternatively, the southern chapels were almost complete externally (and were vaulted internally) in 1326 whilst the northern chapels were much less advanced, so that work was concentrated on the northern ones at the resumption, with the same result that two of the southern ones escaped completion. Regardless of interpretation, however, what matters is that there are important differences between the chapels which are best explained by a major break in the work. An examination of the interior produces the same conclusion.

11. McKisack, 97, n. 1.

12. Harvey, 'Origin of Perpendicular', 144-5 and 160.

13. Particularly the south-east transept at Hereford, which seems to be the chapel of SS. John the Evangelist and Michael built by Thomas de Canteburgh between 1364 and 1371 (W. W. Capes, *The Charters and Records of Hereford Cathedral*, 1908, 231-2; and see Morris, 442-5).

Two distinct types of construction are visible in the vault cells of the ambulatory and chapels. Those of the east bay and the two north-east bays of the ambulatory have rather uneven stone-courses and slightly rounded ridges, the latter often formed by placing small stones crosswise. The vaults of the chapels of St Edmund and St Margaret adjoining the two north-east bays are constructed in the same way, which implies that the lost vault of the Lady chapel, which adjoined the east bay, is more likely to have been of this sort too. On the other hand, the cells of all the other ambulatory bays, of the two southern apsidal chapels, and of the sacristy, are built of larger, better-finished stones and have more, angular ridges. As with the exterior of the chapels, the stylistic criteria do not produce a sufficiently consistent pattern to indicate clearly which type is earlier and it is not vital to this context. What is much more important is that the most likely explanation for the existence of the two types is a major break in construction.

There are numerous examples of poor assembly work and unfinished carving in the remodelling, particularly in the upper parts of the building, which seem to be evidence of a cut-back in expenditure and quality after the resumption of work. A good example is the stonework of the tracery in the choir clerestory. Both internally and externally, the mullion employed in the tracery of the heads is formed from a roll and fillet imposed on two ogee mouldings, whereas the exterior profile of the vertical mullions below is simply a double wave moulding (FIG. 2). The awkward transition between the two has been overcome in some places by the use of a capital, but in other places these have been omitted (PLATE II). Internally, there is the even uglier sight of mullions which are a mixture of both types of moulding. Also, on the exterior of the two southern windows of the clerestory, there are several examples of bad assembly work of the arch and gable mouldings, including an uncarved crocket. Again, on the stringcourse of the choir clerestory parapet, only the three easternmost bays are decorated with fleurons and heads (PLATE II), whereas, if we may assume that it was the original intention to decorate its whole length, then we have a good instance of the way in which the original lavish programme was cut back. Even as low as the arcade level in the choir, we find the carved head-stops missing from some of the capitals at the springing points of the arches, and the diaper-work decoration on the exposed masonry on the choir side of the ambulatory arches omitted in some bays.<sup>14</sup>

From this historical and stylistic data, an outline of the development of the building programme may be reconstructed. The remodelling was probably conceived between c. 1318 and 1320, and perhaps one season's work was done before the short interruption in 1321, but work really got under way in earnest in the four building seasons between 1323 and 1326. The impression is that it began on a grand scale, probably on several parts of the building simultaneously, and that a large force of masons was engaged. The whole arrangement of eastern chapels was obviously laid out in one sweep up to the level of their plinth mouldings at least. There are also a considerable number of masons' marks in the area of the ambulatory and radiating chapels, more than on any other work I have inspected in this period; they fall into at least seven varieties, concentrated mainly on the lower stone-courses of the ambulatory arches and the entrance arches to the chapels. These testify to the large area from which masons were drawn, if we may accept that the marks were put on the first pieces of skilled cutting done for the master mason by craftsmen unknown to him, so that he could check the quality of their work.

It is likely that the part of the building on which most attention was lavished during these years was the tall Lady chapel, now almost completely gone except for its west wall, but which was five bays long, terminating in a three-sided apse: its external length was about 72 feet.<sup>15</sup> From this

14. There are heads carved on the inside of the choir piers, directly beneath the springing point of the south, south-east, and east arcade arches, but they are omitted in the north and north-east arches: the exposed masonry of the ambulatory arches on the choir side is decorated with diaper pattern on the northern, north-east, and south-west arches, but the other arches have been left blank.

15. I am most grateful to Mr Thomas Overbury of Messrs Healing & Overbury of Cheltenham for making available to me information on the Lady chapel derived from the excavation of the site in 1940, and also to Mr Thurstan Holland-Martin for putting me in touch with Mr Overbury. A brief account of the excavation is to be found in the *Seventh Annual Report of the Friends of Tewkesbury Abbey* (1940).

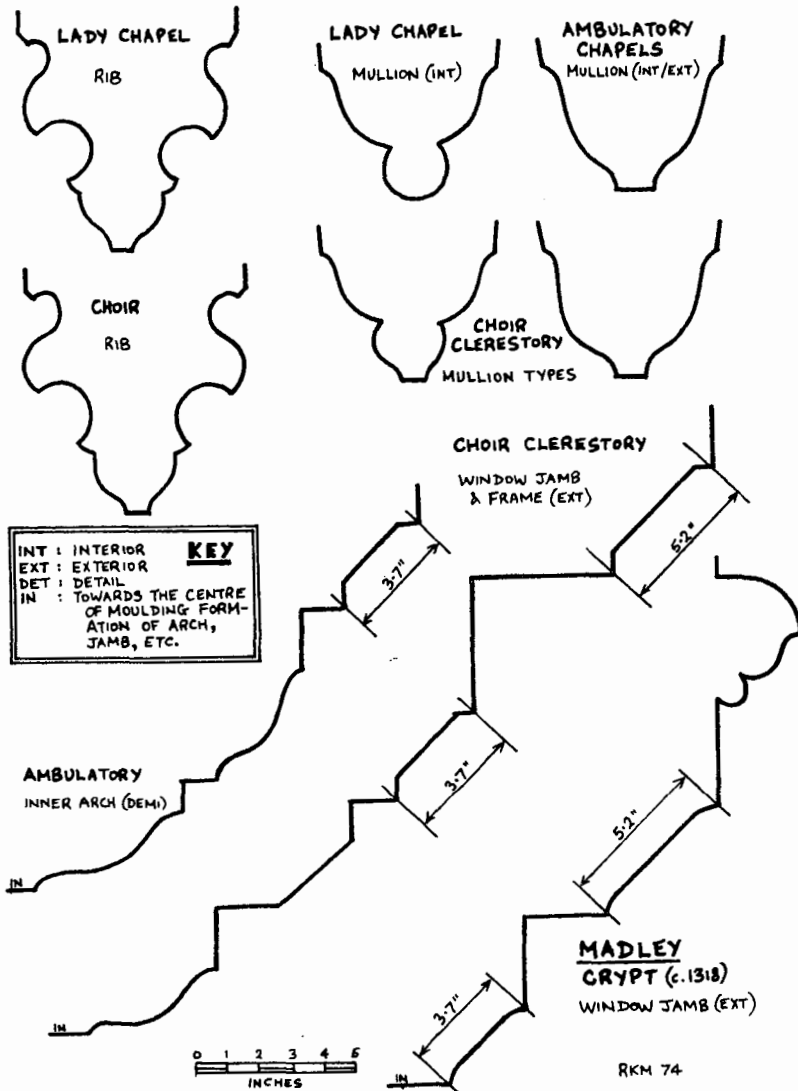


FIG. 2. Tewkesbury, early and late work, moulding affinities.

period may well come most of the ballflower work, such as the font, the piscina in St Faith's chapel, and especially the sacristy. The mouldings of the ballflower work in the sacristy and those of the window jambs in the Lady chapel are closely related to those of the ballflower encrusted south aisle at Gloucester, begun in 1318, which justifies placing these amongst the earlier work at Tewkesbury (FIG. 3). The so-called 'Forthampton' tomb recess probably belongs to this period too, for its position and style seem to indicate that it commemorates a person particularly concerned with the sacristy. As Gilbert de Clare III and his wife are buried before the high altar, and all the Despencers lie buried around the edge of the sanctuary (FIG. 1), the tomb recess is probably that of an abbot, in which case the most likely candidate is Thomas Kempsey, 1282-1328. The unusual form of the cusping of the arch, large foils separated by double cusps, is found also in the re-arch of the ballflower window in the triforium of the south transept at Gloucester, and which can be shown to have

been executed about the same time (c. 1327-31) as Kempsey's death, and probably to the design of the same master mason.<sup>16</sup>

When work came to a halt after the downfall of Despenser, about half the ring of chapels must have been more or less complete (perhaps the southern ones). There is practically no tangible evidence left as to the state of the Lady chapel at this time, but it was not completely finished because the surviving western clerestory window belongs with certain windows at the east end of the nave aisles, and thus to the 1330s.<sup>17</sup> Probably almost half the ambulatory bays were vaulted, and perhaps all the ambulatory arches were in position. But it is unlikely that work had progressed much further at the east end, except that a fair quantity of mouldings had probably been cut ready for assembly. There seems to be no clue as to how rapidly the work on the nave had progressed, though the tracery of the nave aisles appears to belong to the 1330s (see below). The quantity of mouldings left unused might well be the explanation behind the hotchpotch of mouldings in the choir clerestory windows after work resumed, in that a surplus (perhaps originally intended for a part of the remodelling which was dropped from the scheme in the 1330s) was used up where the discrepancy would not be noticeable to anyone at ground level.

At the resumption of operations around 1332, there is no reason to think that any major changes took place in design, though restricted finances may have necessitated a trimming of the original extravagant scheme. Nonetheless, some lavish work was still carried out, as the sedilia and choir vault testify. The main features of the work can be shown to have been designed c. 1320, or to be based on work of that date. The ribs of the choir are identical to those used in the Lady chapel, and one of the types of mullion found in the choir clerestory is based on the Lady chapel mullions, whilst the other type is exactly the same as those employed in all the radiating chapels except the sacristy (FIG. 2). The interior window jambs of the choir clerestory are only a slight variant of those in the Lady chapel (FIG. 3), and the outer part of the exterior profiles is closely related to the crypt window jambs at Madley in Herefordshire (FIG. 2), a work that can be dated on documentary evidence to c. 1318, and which has numerous other connections with the design of Tewkesbury.<sup>18</sup> Both the nave and choir vaults are based on a system of one- and two-bay diagonals which, as Bock has shown, first appeared in vault design in Exeter cathedral rood screen, begun about 1317.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the choir vault makes considerable play with daggers and pointed trefoils between the ribs, a combination that is very reminiscent of the heads of the windows in Gloucester south aisle.

However, it is possible that some of the window tracery designed c. 1320 was brought up to date, for certain features of the tracery in the nave aisles, the transepts, and choir clerestory seem to be more at home in the 1330s. All the nave aisle windows except the eastern one in the south aisle and the two eastern ones in the north aisle incorporate large ogees in their tracery, each spanning a pair of lights so that a lozenge shape is formed at the junction of the two lights (e.g., the window on the extreme right in PLATE III). The same design is the basis of the three eastern windows of the choir clerestory. This use of the ogee is bolder than in the tracery of the radiating chapels, and very close precedents can be found for it, for example, in the choir aisles at Wells and in the blind tracery of the pulpitum at Southwell, both works which seem to belong to the later 1320s or c. 1330.<sup>20</sup> Another feature which suggests post-1330 dating is the elongated panel in the heads of the large reticulated windows in the central bay of the choir clerestory and in the west wall of the transepts (e.g., the window on the extreme left in PLATE III), an influence perhaps from the south window of the south transept at Gloucester (1331-7).

The two most ornate sculptural works belonging to this period are the choir sedilia and the

16. Morris, 137-9.

17. *Ibid.*, 241-4.

18. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, Ch. VI, especially 299-304. The most important of these connections is the close resemblance between the forms of the chancel at Madley and the Lady chapel at Tewkesbury, both terminating in a polygonal apse, a feature rarely encountered in English Gothic.

19. Bock, 'Exeter Rood Screen', especially FIGS 5 and 11.

20. For Wells, see N. Pevsner, *North Somerset & Bristol* (Harmondsworth 1958) 302; and for Southwell, see L. Stone, *Sculpture in Britain: the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth 1955) 260, n. 46, and N. Pevsner, *Nottinghamshire* (Harmondsworth 1951) 169.

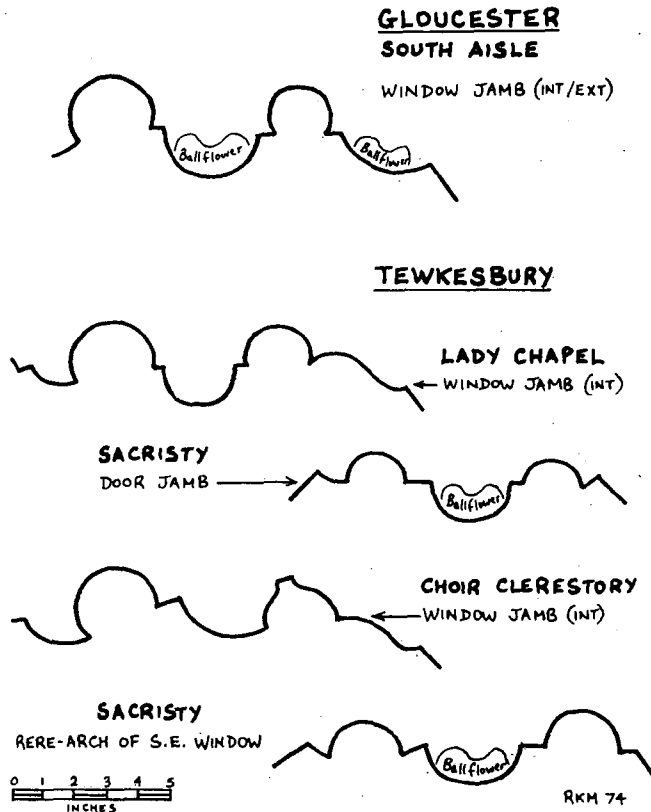


FIG. 5. Gloucester and Tewkesbury, jamb mouldings.

elaborate tomb recess directly behind it in the ambulatory (PLATE IV). The latter almost certainly marks the grave of Despenser the younger, for his son Hugh is buried in exactly the same position on the opposite side of the high altar (FIG. 1). It cannot be the tomb of one of the De Clares, as they all lie in front of the sanctuary step, nor is it likely that Despenser's tomb was in the lost Lady chapel, as all the other members of his family are buried around the edges of the sanctuary. In addition, there is a fair chance that the fragments of a tomb-chest, ostentatiously decorated with ballflower and heraldry, today lying to the right of the recess, may also have belonged to his tomb. The recess must belong to the early or mid 1330s, for we have seen that the permit allowing Despenser's remains to be collected and interred was not issued until late in the year 1330. The form of cusping employed in the miniature arcading over the recess confirms a date of this sort, for the cusps are barbed, an unusual feature, found in this area only in the panelling of the south transept at Gloucester and, to a lesser extent, of the choir there. The choir sedilia is likewise of exquisite quality, and, as it appears to be bonded into the back of the recess, it is also probably of about the same date.

If the foregoing thesis is correct, and the remodelling was essentially the conception of no less a person than the royal favourite, then the identity of the architect engaged on the work assumes considerable importance. This article does not claim to solve the problem, but simply to present some observations and ideas which may aid its ultimate solution, and which should stimulate renewed investigation into the nature of the Court style at this time.

Elsewhere, I have demonstrated in considerable detail the strong stylistic affinities between certain

features of the work at Tewkesbury and numerous other local works spanning the period c. 1310–45, such as the central tower of Hereford cathedral and the south aisle at Gloucester.<sup>21</sup> These affinities suggest, at the very least, the existence of a clearly recognizable workshop with its operations centred on Hereford and north Gloucestershire, and some of the parallels between the various buildings involved are so simultaneous and precise that, in the context of our limited state of knowledge on such matters, they are most logically explained for the moment by the presence of a single master designer, whose style dominated the workshop throughout this period.<sup>22</sup> This anonymous master (or his workshop) was certainly involved in the remodelling at Tewkesbury, and he may have been the master in charge of the building operations. However, there are features present which cannot be explained by reference to his previous works, and which indicate considerable influence from outside this local sphere.

Of particular relevance here is the fact that a noticeable influence from the Court style of London can be detected in the remodelling, and in other local works stylistically related to it. Numerous details are present which are paralleled especially in the style of the Canterbury school of masons, of which two of the most notable members, Michael (*fl.* 1275–1320) and Thomas (*fl.* 1323–35), were the master masons in charge of work on the royal chapel of St Stephen at Westminster.<sup>23</sup> As is well-known, the chapel perished in the great fire of 1834 that destroyed the palace of Westminster, so that it has to be reconstructed from various drawings and engravings, the interpretation of which is not always entirely clear (PLATE V).<sup>24</sup> However, the details that concern us here for comparison with Tewkesbury are all substantiated in a group of works attributed to the Canterbury school in Canterbury itself, such as the tomb of archbishop Peckham (d. 1292), prior Eastry's choir screen in the cathedral (after 1304), and the great gatehouse of St Augustine's abbey, under construction in 1308. Some also appear on the series of Eleanor crosses (after 1291), on which Michael of Canterbury was one of the main masons involved, and again on certain royal tombs at Westminster attributed by Harvey to the Canterburys, notably those of Edmund Crouchback (d. 1296) and Aymer de Valence (d. 1324).

The relevant features at Tewkesbury are given below, followed in some instances by a brief list of the main works of the Canterbury school in which each is to be found. The significant point is that in every case these features are employed in the Canterburys' work at a date earlier than the Tewkesbury design.<sup>25</sup>

- (a) Decorative miniature crenellation appears around the octagonal turrets at the west end of the Lady chapel and above the chapel of St Faith, in the choir clerestory parapet, and, inside, along the top of the screen between the ambulatory and the choir (St Stephen's/Peckham/Crouchback/Eastry/St Augustine's/Aymer de Valence).
- (b) Horizontal bands of decorative quatrefoils occur along the base of the 'Forthampton' recess and the tomb of Despenser the younger (octofoils in this case (PLATE IV)), and on the ballflower tomb-chest also tentatively attributed to the latter (see St Stephen's/Peckham/Crouchback/St Augustine's; and decorative crenellation and quatrefoils also occur together on the Eleanor crosses). Bands of quatrefoils also survive on the west wall of the Lady chapel, as extensions of

21. Morris, Ch. III, especially pt. 1.

22. *Ibid.*, 33–41.

23. For a full catalogue of their documented and attributed works, see J. H. Harvey, *English Medieval Architects: a Biographical Dictionary down to 1550* (London 1954) 52–4; also Harvey, 'Origin of Perpendicular', especially 148–9 and 161–2.

24. See Hastings, Ch. IV, pt. 1, and Harvey's views in 'Origin of Perpendicular', especially n. 27.

25. In listing these details, I do not wish to imply that they were all executed by a royal mason, as the rendition of most of them precludes that possibility (e.g., the treatment of most of the bands of foiled figures), though some of the works in question are of a quality comparable to the Westminster tombs (e.g., the sedilia and Despenser the younger's tomb); I wish simply to imply the general influence of royal and Canterbury work in certain aspects of the design.

the top and bottom mouldings of the capitals at the springing points of the vault ribs and of the rere-arches of the lateral windows. This rather unusual idea of linking the bands to capitals may also have drawn its inspiration from the Canterburys' work at St Augustine's gatehouse, where a band of quatrefoils is placed at the same level as the gateway capitals, though not physically connected with them; and perhaps at St Stephen's, if we may trust the illustrations of Mackenzie and Brayley and Britton on this point (PLATE V, between the capitals at the springing of the window arches in the interior of the upper chapel). It should be noted, however, that only in the case of the Despenser tomb do the foiled figures rival the delicate quality and panelled form of London work; the other examples are more heavily handled, and are therefore influenced by Court work only in their general form.

In this context, one might also mention the choir clerestory parapet (PLATE II), which consists of a band of trefoil-cusped triangles, a form of decoration employed at an early date across the front of St Augustine's gatehouse. A band of trefoils with miniature crenellation above, as in the Tewkesbury parapet, is also found along the top of the Eastry screen, though the trefoils lack the triangular framing.

- (c) The tomb attributed to Despenser the Younger makes great play with bands of miniature steeply-pointed gables above niches (PLATE IV), and a comparable effect on a very tiny scale is to be seen in the gables crowning the uprights of the sedilia. This feature, which is found in certain other local works stylistically associated with Tewkesbury (e.g., around the lower part of the former west tower at Hereford cathedral),<sup>26</sup> may derive its inspiration from the rows of decorative gables along the front of St Augustine's gatehouse and the exterior of St Stephen's (PLATE V), also bearing in mind their playful use in the canopy of the Crouchback tomb.
- (d) The tracery of the south-east window in the sacristy consists of two trefoil-cusped ogee lights with an ogee cinquefoil set in a roundel in the head, a design employed more extensively in two works very dependent stylistically on Tewkesbury—the chancel of neighbouring Bishops Cleeve, and the nave of Pembridge in Herefordshire (ogee cinquefoils in circular clerestory windows).<sup>27</sup> The ogee cinquefoil was a favourite motif of the Canterbury school, and was used over two ogee lights, exactly as at Tewkesbury and Bishops Cleeve, on the Eastry screen and in the main chamber of St Augustine's gatehouse, and on its own in the exterior spandrels of St Stephen's (PLATE V) and in the centre of the rose in the great window of St Anselm's Chapel, Canterbury (c. 1356).

In this context, it is also possible that the Canterburys' relative fondness for roundels and the rose pattern—besides those mentioned above, there is the probability of a large rose in the great east window of St Stephen's—had some influence on the roundels in the heads of the three eastern choir clerestory windows at Tewkesbury, and especially on the large flower-like patterns of the choir vault and the adjacent vault in St Margaret's chapel. Rose windows, never of course a common element in English Gothic, also appear in north Gloucestershire at this period in the north transept of Cheltenham parish church and the south transept at Minchinhampton, both closely connected stylistically with Tewkesbury, particularly the former.

- (e) The sedilia and, to a lesser extent, certain details of the 'Forthampton' tomb, are stylistically part of a group of local tombs which are clearly influenced by the form of the Peckham and Crouchback monuments. The canopies of the tombs in question—two anonymous recesses at Bredon three miles from Tewkesbury and at Withington near Cheltenham, and that of bishop

26. Morris, Ch. III, pts. 1 and 6.

27. *Ibid.*, 162–3 and Ch. V, pt. 2, for Bishops Cleeve and Pembridge respectively. Though the *Victoria County History of Gloucestershire*, VIII, 22, notes that there was a dispute over money given for the repair of Bishops Cleeve chancel as early as 1301, nonetheless, on stylistic grounds, the work makes more sense in the 1320s, and seems to be very close in date to Pembridge (c. 1350).

Thomas Charlton (d. 1344) in the north transept of Hereford cathedral—have a pointed gable with tympanum, an almost rounded arch with very broad cusping tipped with foliage, each foil further divided by smaller trefoil-cusping, and the whole structure flanked by pinnacled side-shafts: all features very reminiscent of the Court works under consideration.<sup>28</sup> The Charlton tomb, with its bold semicircular cusping, is particularly recognizable as a design based on the Peckham tomb, whilst the pointed trefoil in its tympanum (also present in the Bredon tomb) is an adaptation of the rounded ones in the tympana of the Westminster tombs (PLATE VI). Each seat unit of the Tewkesbury sedilia also conforms to this basic design, and, in addition, the steep angle of the gables and its exquisite minuscule decoration make it even more reminiscent of Westminster work. This high quality decoration also applies to the mutilated remains of Despenser the younger's tomb at the back of the sedilia.

- (f) With regard to the mouldings, detailed research still needs to be done on the relationship between the Tewkesbury ones and those employed by the Canterburys, but it seems fairly clear, for example, that the arch mouldings of the Peckham and Crouchback tombs are the basis for those of the sedilia and the group of tombs described above (FIG. 4). Again, the design of the Lady chapel mullions at Tewkesbury (itself the basis of some of the choir clerestory mullions) may owe its ultimate inspiration to the interior profile of the mullions still surviving in St Stephen's undercroft, with the detached marble shaft replaced by a freestone roll moulding (FIG. 4).

The way in which the influence of the Canterbury school arrived at Tewkesbury is open to several explanations. It is possible that it was transmitted through the anonymous local master mentioned above, for he seems to have received his main training on the chapter house of Wells cathedral,<sup>29</sup> which is so similar in many points of design to the accepted works of the Canterburys that it would appear that the royal master mason at that time, Michael of Canterbury, may have acted as a consultant there.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, in comparison with previous works of this local workshop, Tewkesbury represents a renewed burst of Canterbury influence (e.g., the first use of bands of quatrefoils, and the first extensive use of miniature crenellation), so that it is not impossible that a member of the Canterbury school acted as consultant here too—perhaps Michael of Canterbury again, in the closing years of his career. However, the masons bearing the name of Canterbury were probably not the only ones to employ the features outlined above in their work, and it could be that another mason from the Kent/Court circle gave advice at Tewkesbury.

There is some fragmentary but extremely important documentary evidence surviving for work being carried out for the same patron, Hugh le Despenser, at Caerphilly castle in 1326, which sheds some light on this problem. Certain letters and a receipt show that master Thomas de la Bataile was engaged there, along with the royal carpenter, master William Hurley.<sup>31</sup> De la Bataile is thought to have been associated with Leeds castle near Maidstone in Kent (a favourite castle of Edward I and Queen Eleanor), and is known to have worked in the royal service in London; he was perhaps the son of master John de la Bataile, who was employed in a senior capacity at Edward I's foundation of Vale Royal abbey in Cheshire in 1278, and who was jointly responsible for no less than five of the Eleanor crosses.<sup>32</sup> The possibility, therefore, exists, and needs further investigation, that the same Thomas de la Bataile was responsible for introducing the Court-patronized features of the Canterbury school at Tewkesbury.

Indeed, the immense power of Despenser at Court in the later years of Edward II, and the

28. *Ibid.*, 165-6 (Withington), 181-4 (Bredon) and 405-7 (Charlton tomb).

29. *Ibid.*, Ch. II, pt. 4.

30. *Ibid.*, 46-8 and 114-16.

31. Cited in full in A. J. Taylor, 'Building at Caerphilly in 1326', in *Board of Celtic Studies Bulletin*, XIV, 4 (1952), 299-300.

32. See Harvey, *English Medieval Architects*, 26-7.

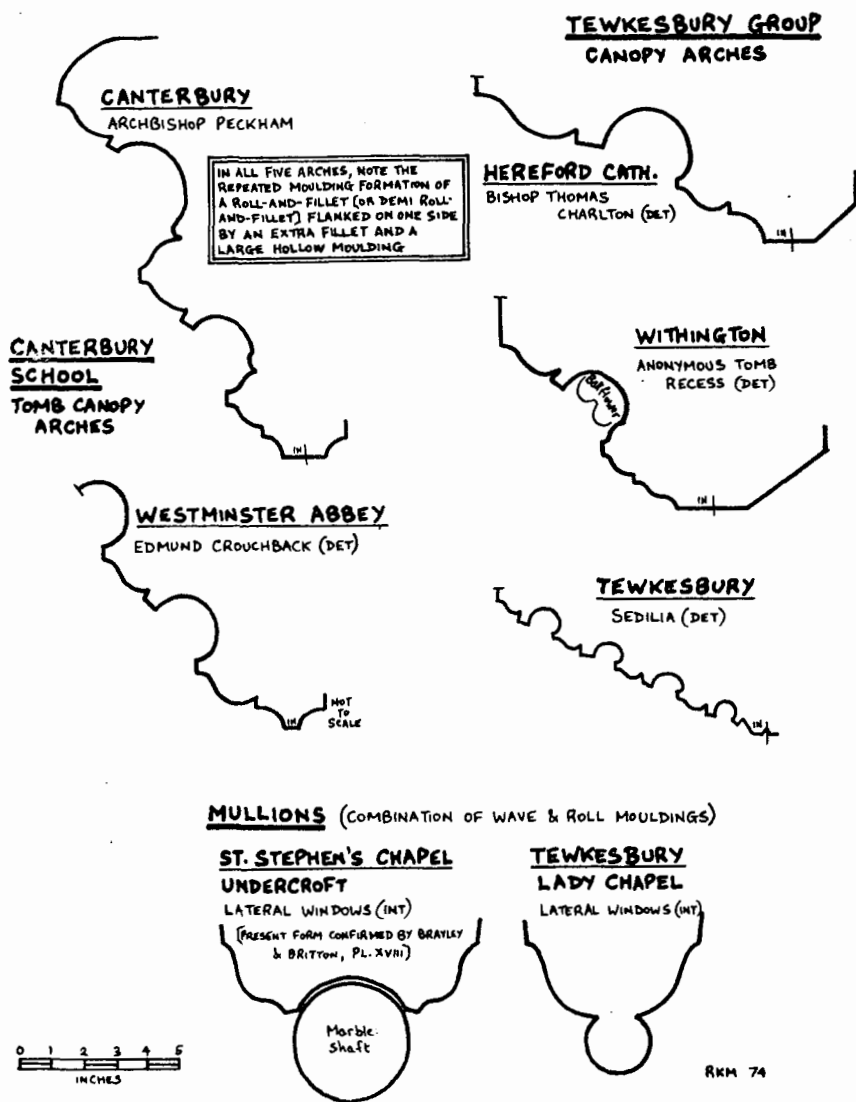


FIG. 4. Court style mouldings.

symbolism behind the rebuilding at Tewkesbury, make it almost certain that frequent reference to the artistic fashions of the Court would be found there, and suggest that a royal master mason would at least have been consulted about the work. In fact, given the fortunate survival of the documentation concerning de la Bataile and Hurley, it is tempting to speculate how much more of the design might be influenced by a royal mason than just the details enumerated above. For example, is it possible that the idea of representing the Paradise Garden imagery in the choir vault is derived from the current modes of courtly life, in which we know how influential the spirit of the romance was at this period.<sup>33</sup> After all, the choir vault is generally regarded as the closest known predecessor of

33. See, for example, R. S. Loomis, 'Edward I, Arthurian Enthusiast', in *Speculum*, XXVIII (1953), 114-27; I am grateful to Alastair Kerr of the University of Victoria for this reference.

the fan-vault, which makes its first definite appearance in the strongly Court-influenced context of Gloucester, and which ultimately finds its finest expression in the works of Court masons (King's College chapel, Henry VII's chapel, *et al.*). More research into such thorny problems is needed, but the historical evidence presented so far implies that Tewkesbury should be regarded as one of the most lavish surviving expressions of the architectural tastes of the Court in the latter part of Edward II's reign, and not simply as a provincial work. And if this interpretation is correct, it suggests that the view of mature Decorated as an essentially provincial style is in need of re-examination in the light of social and historical evidence.<sup>34</sup>

Tewkesbury, therefore, is not to be written off as the 'poor country cousin' of Gloucester in the 14th century, but to be regarded as a manifestation of one aspect of the Court style, just as the later Perpendicular remodelling at Gloucester is another. No wonder abbot Thokey was so keen to give burial to the unwanted body of Edward II in 1327—he was irked by the way in which Despenser's rebuilding threatened to outdo his own establishment, still essentially Norman in its fabric, and doubtless he foresaw the future architectural benefits that might stem from the reception of a king's body.

<sup>34</sup>. For further thoughts on this issue, see Morris, *op. cit.*, especially Introduction, pt. 2 (43 ff.) and Conclusion.

*This article is based on a lecture given at the Tewkesbury Abbey Festival in 1971, and I should like to thank the vicar, the Reverend C. G. R. Pouncey, for that opportunity to talk on this subject, and for his enthusiastic support during my research there.*