

The Act of 1471 and its effect on the Royal Arms of Scotland

by Charles J Burnett

'The King, with the advice of the three Estates ordained that in time to come there should be no double tressure about his arms, but that he should bear whole arms of the lyoun without any more' (Act Parl Scot Rec ed ii 102b). So stated the Act of Parliament dated February 1471 which was passed at a time when James III was contemplating a visit to the French court. Perhaps Parliament wanted to make it quite clear that the double tressure with its fleur-de-lis decoration was no indication that Scotland came under French domination. The existence of this Act and its effect on the appearance of the Royal Arms of Scotland has been noted by various writers on Scottish Heraldry (Seton 1863, 426; Balfour Paul 1898, 53; Fraser 1913, 109; Stevenson 1914, 392-3; Kelly 1934, 366; Apted and Robertson 1962, 263).

In mentioning the Act, Seton and Balfour Paul wrote that they knew of no examples where the Royal Arms appeared without the tressure either during or after the period around 1471. However, in 1913 Fraser drew attention to a carved stone built into one of the piers of the Bridge of Dee in Aberdeen which has a lion rampant on a plain shield surmounted by an open crown (pl 26a). As this unique stone could not have been carved before 1525 it is a very late example considering what else has come to light. Some heraldic authorities hold the theory that once the Act was passed it was quickly realised that without the double-tressure flory counter flory the Royal Arms could be confused with other coats of arms, particularly if displayed without heraldic tinctures. Whatever the reason, the panel on the Bridge of Dee remains the only example so far found which complies with the terms of the Act.

A compromise was made soon after the Act was passed whereby that portion of the double tressure which occurs above the lion rampant was omitted, leaving the double tressure to surround the lion on two sides only.

When Stevenson discussed the Royal Arms in his book *Heraldry in Scotland* (1914) he did not mention the Aberdeen example but listed four occasions when the Arms are shown without the top section of the tressure. These were:

- (a) The Arms of James II impaled with those of Mary of Guelders on the 'King's Pillar' in the choir of St Giles Cathedral (pl 26b). This is a puzzling example as James II had died in 1460, eleven years before the Act was passed. The shield must have been carved after 1471 only to have the tressure completed when it was realised that the Royal Arms during the period of James II bore the unbroken double tressure. The other two Royal Arms on the same pillar, for King James II himself and his son, the future King James III, are shown with complete tressures (see RCAMS 1951, 32).
- (b) The Arms of James III on the Trinity College Altarpiece, now in the National Gallery of Scotland (pl 26c).
- (c) The Royal Arms in the great hall of Comlongon Castle, Dumfriesshire (pl 26d).
- (d) The Royal Arms on a panel in Cranshaws Church, Berwickshire (pl 26e).

The next example to appear was included in an article by Kelly (1930) though he did not realise the significance of the broken tressure (pl 27a). Sir Thomas Innes of Learney, at that time Carrick Pursuivant, pointed out the reason for the broken tressure and Kelly added a correction (1934, 366). Finally Apted and Robertson mentioned another example when discussing the ceiling of the Guthrie Aisle (1962, 263) which was used to date the ceiling (pl 27b). Up until now we have therefore had seven examples of Royal Arms showing evidence of the effect of the 1471 Act on Royal Heraldry of the period. Other examples have since come to light and possibly more still await discovery.

Stevenson stated that this heraldic variant did not appear as far as he was aware on any of the Royal seals (1914, 193) but it did appear on another article which produced multiples, namely a coin die. The famous gold piece, known to numismatists as the 'Unicorn' (pl 27c), issued during the reign of James III (Burns 9, variety), carries the broken tressure. The earliest known record of this coin is in a legal judgement for repayment of debt, dated 18th January 1484/5 – 'xijli in gold callit unicornis twenty s. to the pece' (Acta Dom Conc 1 94) which indicates that coins of that name had been in circulation sometime before January 1484/5 (Murray 1971, 62–96). All the James III issues of the coin and early issues of James IV omit the top of the tressure.

Four other examples of this heraldic oddity can now be added to the list. Pl 27d shows the Royal Arms on the gatehouse of Caerlaverock Castle where it forms part of a sandstone plaque bearing the badge of Robert, 2nd Lord Maxwell. This example from the extreme south of Scotland

is matched by another much further north. On the capital of the central pillar supporting the roof of the Chapter House at Elgin Cathedral (pl 27e) is another example bearing the broken tressure. There are actually three Royal Arms carved on the stonework of the Chapter House but only the one illustrated falls within our category. As the Chapter House was restored during the incumbency of Bishop Andrew Stewart this example must have been carved between 1482 and 1501. Another, on a boss, occurs on the vaulting of the South Choir in Jedburgh Abbey probably erected when John Hall was Abbot between 1478 and 1484 (pl 28a). The last example, also on a boss, is to be seen in the choir of Seton Collegiate Church, East Lothian (pl 28b). The section of vaulting which contains the boss was erected by the 3rd Lord Seton who died *c* 1478.

Thus we can see that the Act had more effect than was realised by earlier heraldic writers and in their scattered distribution the examples show that Parliament's decision was made known throughout the realm. There is one other tentative conclusion to be drawn from the examples.

The earliest documented version occurs on the coin and this has the double tressure neatly cut off at the two terminating points; this feature also occurs on the 'King's Pillar' shield (pl 26b), the Trinity College Altarpiece (pl 26c), on the Cranshaws panel (pl 26e), the Jedburgh Abbey boss (pl 28a), and the Seton boss. This leads me to believe that these six can be grouped to form the earliest examples of Royal Arms executed after Parliament's decision. The four remaining examples (pls 27a, b, d, e) have the tressure terminals cut off at right angles so forming a second group which could have been carved towards or after the end of the 1480-90 decade. Further confirmation of this can be seen in the post-1488 unicorn coins of James IV (Burns 1, division) which also have the blunt tressure terminals. Later unicorns of James IV revert to having the complete double tressure.

On a document dated 1476 now in Register House is affixed the seal of John, Lord of the Isles which also carried a broken tressure. Further researches may show that other magnates, granted the honour of the double tressure for their Arms, followed the example of the King by omitting the top section of the tressure.

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a Royal arms on S pillar on W side of Bridge of Dee, Aberdeen



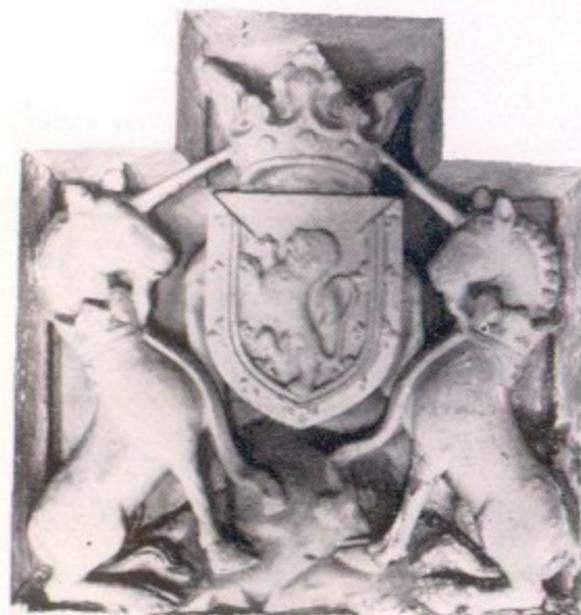
b Shield on 'King's Pillar'. St Giles Church, Edinburgh



c Trinity College altarpiece



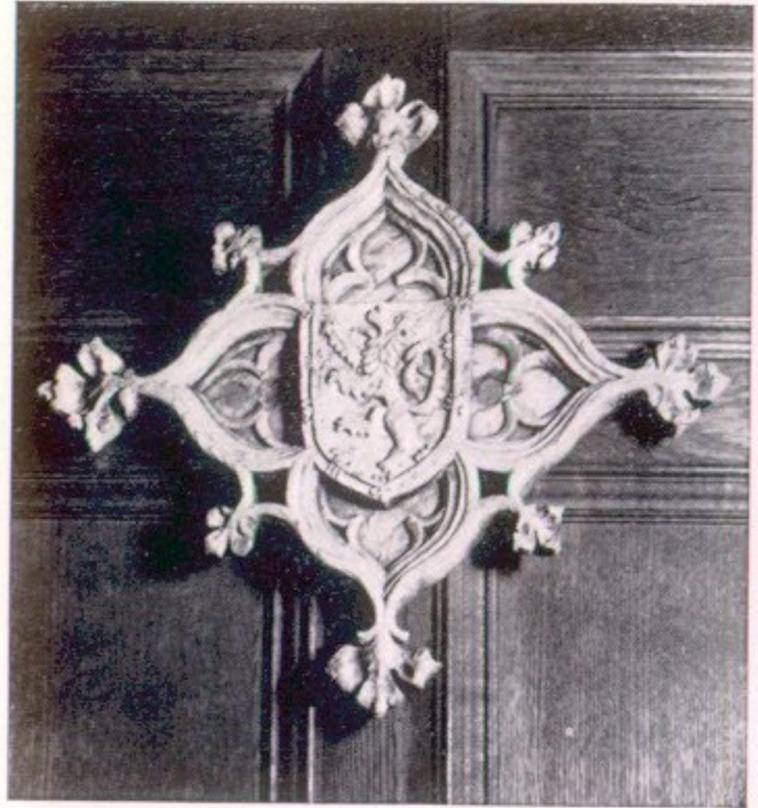
d Royal arms, Comlongon Castle, Dumfriesshire



e Royal arms, Cranshaws Church, Berwickshire



a Royal arms on panel made for Thomas Spens, Bishop of Aberdeen 1459-80



b Royal arms from ceiling of Guthrie Aisle



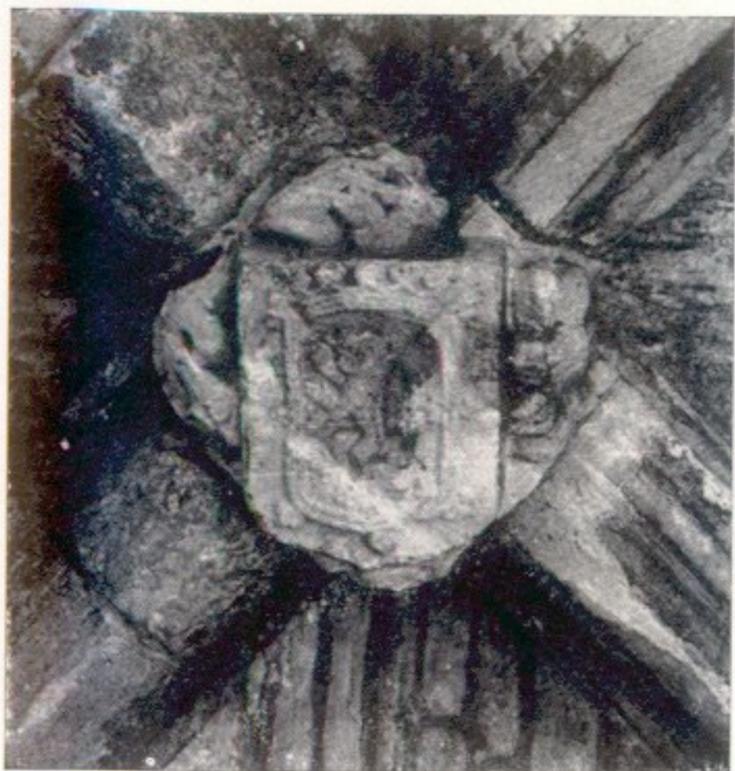
c Unicorn of James III



e Royal arms, Elgin Cathedral Chapter House



d Royal arms, Caerlaverock Castle



a Royal arms, Jedburgh Abbey



b Boss in choir of Seton Collegiate Church



c Hatchment of Alexander George Fraser, 16th Lord Saltoun (1758-1853)