

ON THE NORMAN FONT IN THE CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS, TOFTREES, NORFOLK.

By J. E. BALE.

The Saxon name indicates what the place then was ; and still it is, only houses situated among trees, with the fine woods of Raynham, adjacent, and rich pastures around. The situation is peaceful and beautiful, and its houses have been mostly tenanted by the same families of the past four or five generations.

The church dedicated to All Saints, possesses one bell, it is valued as a Vicarage at £200 a year, and it is also a Deanery, so says the Directory, and little else is locally known.

The existing fabric has a nave and chancel, and a western tower, minus the belfry storey ; the architectural features comprise transition Early English, to the Perpendicular period. Its Anglo-Saxon origin is shown by the rude "ashlar" stone work, mostly unwrought, of the exterior angles of the nave and portions of the lower walling. The present nave is probably the extent of the Saxon Church. The stone ashlar is the brown kind locally known as "Car Stone," found round about Hillington towards Lynn, and there still popular as a building stone ; it was in Saxon days easily brought by water down the river Wensum which passes Toftrees at Shereford about two miles off, where there is a church with a round tower, built like Tofts Church in flint rubble, and ashlar of this brown stone, obviously much of it Saxon work also.

The Norman period is evidenced by its fine well-preserved Baptismal Font. The sacred use of the font induced the best art and materials obtainable to be bestowed on it, and was a chief reason why the original, or old font was not replaced by another when churches were altered or rebuilt in succeeding styles. The north door of the nave is round headed and of oak, encrusted externally with lichens and moss, the hinges being corroded almost to nothing ; it may be a Norman door. The church appears never to have been larger than its present small size, and its enclosure or burial ground abutted up to the N.E. angle of the boundary of a former fortified mansion or castle of considerable extent. The moat, of which part still survives as a pond, can be traced from the S.E. angle of the churchyard in an approximate square to the S.W. angle of the enclosure. The site of the gate with flanking towers is distinguishable on the west side, the place of the drawbridge being filled in with debris to facilitate the carrying out of the building materials, which, from traces of extensive foundations must have been of great extent.

The trees in the meadow to the westward still mark the former avenue of approach, though irregular as if grown from seedlings ; the existing

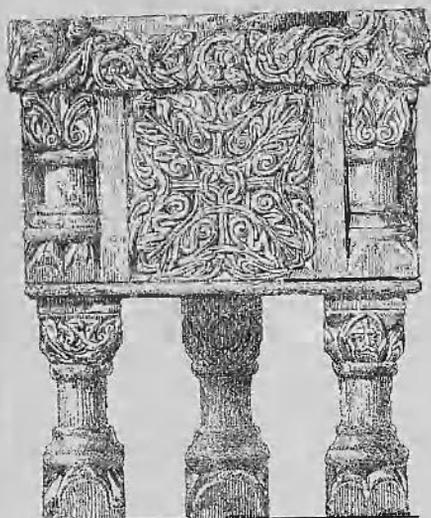
FONT IN TOFT-TREES CHURCH,
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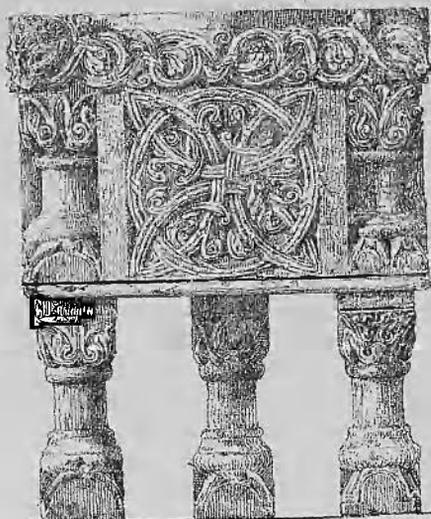
EAST SIDE



NORTH SIDE



SOUTH SIDE



WEST SIDE

Elizabethan house near the church is the probable successor of this moated mansion, and is an excellent example of the architectural use of local materials. It was the manorial residence of the family living there before the property was absorbed into the Raynham estate, and a mural monument, in the chancel of the church, sets forth in sixteenth century Latin, that some of the family rest there. On the chancel floor is a large stone slab from which the brasses have been robbed, but the matrix of the long foliated arms, and of the inscription round the border of the stone are still legible. The church was repaired in the third decade of the last century, but as it now is, it is picturesque, having escaped modern restoration. Within a radius of two and a half miles are ten churches, two in ruins, and the sites of two ecclesiastical buildings, one being the abbey at Hempton by Fakenham on the Wensum. Thus Toftrees was within an important ecclesiastical centre. A sketch of the west end of Toftrees church nave shews the font as it stood some thirty years ago, before it was carefully cleaned of its incrustation of whitewash by the late vicar Mr. Barlow; it is observable the floor of this part of the church is lowered from eight inches to a foot by successive modern burials therein, which caused displacements of the font and destruction of its original base which together with spare debris of various kinds was carried out and the floor replaced in economic form, and in one of such burials the font seems to have been upset, the lower part of the bowl fractured, and other damage done to it; it was set up again on the floor, but not used, for until the late vicar's time a basin only was employed.

Of the font, its Anglo-Celtic identity is obvious, and the systematic way church workmen travelled in co-operation from the earliest times makes it probable that other and similar reproductions of Anglo Celtic work are still extant in this country. In plan it is a square with a circular bowl inside, nearly flat at the bottom; it stands on five short pillars with their respective caps and bases, the centre pillar containing the drain pipe. At each angle of the bowl is a three-quarter round pillar with cap and base. On each face are square panels; that to the east has three circles inscribed in succession from the centre, interlacing with radial leaves; on the north face are the square and lozenge knots interlaced, boldly relieved. On the south is an elaborate leaf-like pattern—composed of two strands, which interlaced with a circle at the centre, and from the vertical and horizontal limbs of a Greek cross, and a cross saltaire in intricate interlacements, making a rich foliaceous pattern, freely executed. On the west is the best piece of work in geometric pattern, a circle, of three strands and four semi-circles each of three strands are interlaced, successively and in detail, the strands or thongs being of equal and regular lengths, the ends are twisted round the remaining strands at that part of the pattern, and terminate in leafy scrolls forming integral, and graceful features in the design, which is rendered with great freedom and flexibility of effect. At three of the upper corners of the bowl is a lamb's head realistically treated, and at the fourth corner is "the wolf in sheep's clothing," an expressively caricatured head. A deep string of boldly designed and freely executed, leafy interlacement extends along the upper part of the bowl developing from, and emerging into each of the heads at the angles, and of different pattern on each face of the bowl. Every cap of the columns is varied in design, the Celtic variety predominates and blends harmoniously with the recognised Norman details. The

whole is evidently from the hand of one skilled art workman, who developed his power as the work progressed up to the limits of the material, and as far as the nature of the tools used would permit.

Of the tools it is clear the scappling hammer and small axe were the chief, perhaps the only ones; no chisel working is apparent, and such tools would cause a stimulus to inventive genius, for a plain surface and a straight line is obviously the more difficult to produce by a monotonous slow process, yet the three-fourth round modeling at the base of the bowl is exactly true and cleanly cut, showing mechanical skill together with artistic excellence in the whole work.

Extracts from Joseph Anderson's work, "Scotland in Early Christian Times: the Art of the Monuments."

"An extraordinary elaboration and finish of minute details of ornament; and a striving after symmetry without mathematical exactitude of repetition, is conspicuous in each of the parts of the patterns separately, as well as in the composition of the decoration as a whole. These also are the prevailing characteristics of the art of the Celtic manuscripts and metal work, characteristics which are visible in every decorated page, and are so persistent in Celtic decoration of every kind that they must be held to be essential qualities of the art. In the possession of these qualities, therefore, as well as in the style and manner of its composition, the decoration of these monuments is completely like that of the Celtic manuscripts and metal work, and totally unlike that of all other monuments."

" Some of the best manuscripts are as early as the close of the seventh century, while the best stone and metal work is later, and comes close to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The natural inference is, therefore, that the art was perfected by the scribes before it was adopted generally by the sculptors and jewelers."

In this connexion it may be well to add the experience of the writer in tracing out a pattern or endeavouring to replace missing parts, that is, to model or make it in similar material to that suggested on the monument, such as cordage or thongs of leather, raw hide preferred, as it is readily laid in shape, and dries in permanent form. This process especially applies to interlacements, and makes the best model for the modern stone carver.

The date of the Toftrees font is approximated as early Norman from its general shape, and the Celtic ornament is an example of early transition from the "interlacement" to foliageous Celtic art, admirably shown in the west panel of the font.

Anderson further observes, "It was a common form of decorative ornament applied to many and various purposes, in different parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa, both before and after the time when, in this country and in Ireland, it became one of the prevailing and dominant characteristics of Celtic art. But, while it was thus used by other people as an occasional element of decoration, or as a style of ornament suitable for special purposes, it was nowhere developed into a systematic style of art, applied alike to manuscripts, metal work, and stone work, unless in this country and in Ireland. In other words, it never gave a distinctive character to any art but Celtic art."

The wide spread influence of this Celtic feeling in art, is demonstrated by the art work of barbaric peoples, such as have probably descended from higher forms of civilization, or lost the touch of former civilized associations, as was noticed in the gold and metal work, especially of the Ashantees, exhibited at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition, West African section; and the writer, speaking from a quarter of a century's knowledge of these people, and the country, finds the most conclusive circumstantial proofs of their former intercourse with the ancient Egyptians and probably with Carthage.

In the Gothic architectural ornament the Norman and Early English periods are very rich in the Celtic elements of design in its later phases, less perceptible through the Decorated period, and scarcely identified or lost in the Perpendicular, but reappearing in burlesqued profusion in the Renaissance of the succeeding period. When men's minds went borrowing new ideas, it was not a revival; hence, not a survival of this form of art, but the study of ancient Celtic art is now commending itself to decorative artists, and art workmen; and "the closer the copy the better is the result." Jewelers applied to the Commissioner for the West African section, at the forenamed exhibition, to be allowed to copy examples of the Ashantee interlaced and spiral gold work. Modern monumental sculptors have essayed on a grand scale to reproduce Celtic forms of ornament, which, though good in workmanship, signally betray a want of knowledge in every detail, and often misconception of the design as a whole. Therefore so perfect an example of Celtic art as the Toftrees Font may be of practical value, enhanced by being made accessible to a great number of students and workers in Celtic art. At home the distance of Scotland or Ireland might be a consideration, besides an incentive to antiquaries and archæologists in seeking for similar examples of early ecclesiastical art workmanship that may exist, but hidden, in other parts of England.