

THE FONT VEIL

By FRANCIS C. EELES

One of my earliest recollections as a child at the end of the last century was that of being told by the old sexton of Luccombe Church in Porlock Vale, on the east side of Exmoor, that long ago the font used to be 'all covered up in white Linen like the communion'. Later on, when I knew more of liturgical things, I realized that this meant that the font veil, well known in medieval times, must have survived at Luccombe far into the nineteenth century. Subsequently I made enquiries of various people in remote churches in the same area to see if anything of the kind was remembered elsewhere and discovered that large linen cloths belonging to the fonts of Lynton and Martinhoe had at one time been laundered in Lynton.

There is other evidence in support of the existence of the font veil at Luccombe. In his *History of part of West Somerset containing the Parishes of Luccombe, etc.* (London, 1901), 158, the late Mr. C. E. M. Chadwick Healey quotes an anonymous author (*A tour in quest of genealogy through several parts of Wales, Somersetshire and Wiltshire*, by a Barrister, 1811) writing from Holnicote, October 30th, 1807, as saying of Luccombe Church, that 'over the font was suspended a linen veil, or covering, in the shape of an extinguisher, a peculiarity I have never before observed in any other church.'

More evidence has recently come to hand proving the use of the font veil not only in post-Reformation times, but also comparatively recently. Before recounting it, something may be said about the font veil in the earlier centuries.

The ornament is ordered by the following rubric in the Sarum Manual :

Veruntamen in sabbato sancto pasche et in vigilia penthecostes peracta consecratione fontium non infundatur oleum neque crisma : nec ulterius in officio baptismi procedatur nisi forte aliquis assit baptizandus : sed lintheamine mundo co-operiantur : et usque ad completorium pasche et penthecostes reseruentur, ut si forte his diebus aliquis baptizandus aduenerit : fecundatis et sanctificatis fontibus olei et crismatis infusione baptizetur.¹

In the Constitutions of the parish clerks at Trinity Church, Coventry, made in 1462, there is the following direction :

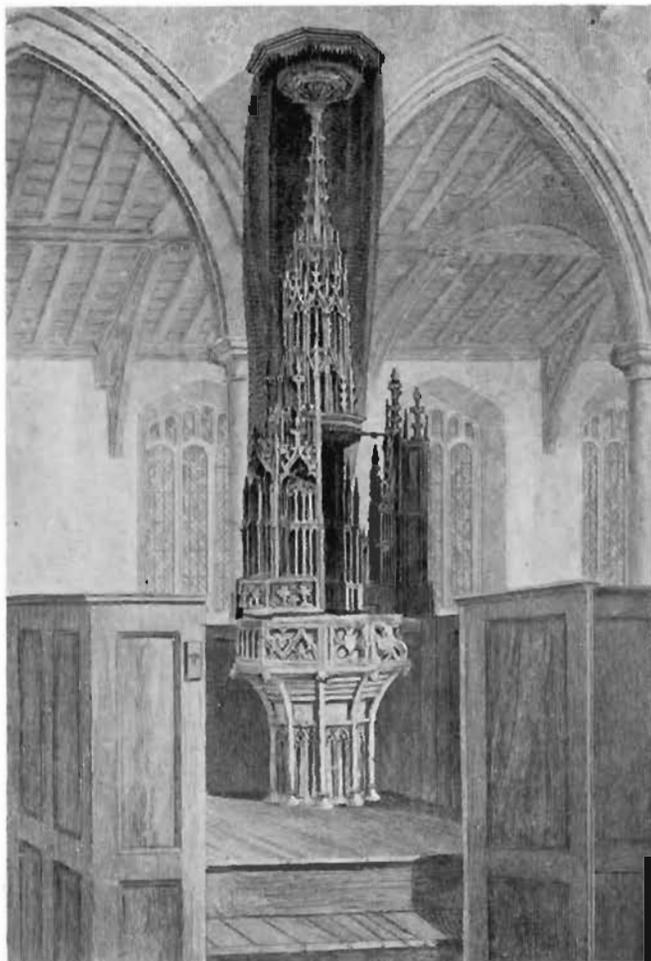
'Also the sayd dekyn schall hyng a towell abowte the Fontt att estur and at wytsontyd.'

In an inventory of Clerkenwell, Middlesex, 1552, the word 'towel' is used for this ornament, though it is just possible that what is indicated is something different ; namely, the cloth or sudary in which was carried to the font the taper used in the ceremonial of the consecration of the water.

The usual medieval term is font cloth. Its material varied : it appears to have been usually of linen, but sometimes of silk, sarcenet or say. In London we find one 'stayned' at St. Lawrence Jewry in 1552 : St. Michael-le-Querne had two of sarcenet : St. Peter, Paul's Wharf, had one 'paned with grene and red sylke'. St. Swithun London Stone had one 'with a frynge'. In a list of 1553 St. Mary-at-Hill had 'ij fovnt clothes, j wrovght with red silk, the other of Gould'.² Soberton

¹ Rouen, Richardus, 1501, fo. xliii, qu, *Clerk's Book*, 115 (H. Bradshaw Soc.) where the editor, Dr. J. Wickham Legg, says that at Milan a sort of Linen canopy is hung over the font continuously.

² *The Mediaeval Records of a City Church* (St. Mary-at-Hill) 1420-1559, ed. H. Littlehales, Early English Text Society, orig. series 125 (London, 1904), 54.



A. ENGRAVING SHOWING VEIL IN USE (1825)



B. FONT COVER, SHOWING ARCHITECTURAL DETAIL
 (Photo: National Buildings Record)



An 18th century Venetian engraving of a christening, showing the font veil draped over the suspended wooden cover and turned back on either side. The rite is presumably the Roman. The priest's surplice and that of the clerk are of a curious sleeveless type once common in North Italy, and very like a chasuble.

(Block lent by Messrs. A. R. Mowbray)

in Hampshire in 1552 had one of white linen,¹ St. Maurice, Winchester, in 1551, had 'ij vante clothes, i of canvas i of holland with a yelow frenge'.² Among seventeen mentioned in Surrey Edwardian inventories, linen is specified thrice, 'saie' once, the rest are merely called font clothes.³ In Berkshire one, at Brightwalton, is of linen painted, three are of lockeram.⁴ At High Wycombe there is the unusual entry of 'a fonte cloth with fyve crosses.'⁵

In view of the survival of the font cloth being chiefly in the Diocese of Exeter, it may be as well to quote the entries in the inventories of the Exeter city churches:⁶

All Hallows, Goldsmith Street: '1 ffounte cloth of lynnyng.'

St. John: 'a lynnyn clothe to hang over the founte.'

St. Laurence: 'iij funte clothes and iij sylke napkins for the funte.'

St. Mary Arches: '3 fount clothes.'

St. Mary Major: 'a fount cloth.'

St. Olave: 'a founte cloth fringed.'

St. Petroc: 'a founte cloth of silke.'

It is only in a minority of cases that we find the font cloth mentioned in inventories.

It seems clear, therefore, that it cannot have been in universal use in medieval times, not only from the evidence of inventories but also from the nature of some of the larger and richer font covers with which its use does not seem compatible. We may compare its use with that of some other coverings or veils. Such things were utilitarian in origin and afterwards became honorific or symbolic. The same was the case with most of the vestments or with lights or incense. First used, no doubt, as some kind of protection, the veil became an outward sign of reverence, used to enhance the importance of what was covered. Later, when this importance was held to be made impressive and significant by a special increase in the decoration of the object itself, the veil was frequently dispensed with. We meet the same thing in connection with the altar, or the place for reservation of the Eucharist. Both custom and rule generally required the altar to be covered with a frontal, but this was sometimes dispensed with if the altar were one of special enrichment. The Ordinal of St. Mary's Abbey, York, in 1390 provides for the altar itself as well as the splendid reredos being exposed at great festivals, and there are other exceptional cases known in England. And we know how widely the custom of leaving the altar uncovered has been tolerated in large areas in the last two or three centuries, particularly in France, and there even longer. So too with the veil over or before the reserved Sacrament: the pix cloth was in general use, but the richer sacrament houses were not all covered, and although the Roman rules require the altar tabernacle to be veiled, in actual practice it has been very common for the order to be ignored.

With these considerations in mind we see how very likely it is that the font veil was not used when the font covers were specially rich or elaborate, and how easily disuse in these instances might lead to disuse in other cases. At the same time there

¹ *Proc. of Hampshire Field Club*, viii, pt. 1 (1917), 7.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ J. R. Daniel-Tyssen, *Inventories of the Goods and Ornaments of the Churches of Surrey* (London, 1869).

⁴ W. Money, *Church Goods in Berkshire* (Oxford, 1879).

⁵ F. C. Eeles, *Edwardian Inventories for Buckinghamshire*, Alcuin Club Collection, ix (1908).

⁶ Cresswell, *Edwardian Inventories for the City and County of Exeter*, Alcuin Club Collection, xx (1916).

is evidence which points to the veil actually having been used on some at any rate of the very high and complicated covers. In the case of Ufford, Suffolk, the largest and richest of all, there is a painted wooden disc at the top, to the underside of which is attached a ring-like iron rod for the curtain-rings at the top of the veil (which must have been huge) to run on.¹ At St. Gregory, Sudbury, Suffolk, the cover is surmounted by an octagonal capital like a flat or miniature tester supported by expanding carved panels, not unlike fan vaulting. This appears to have been provided for the suspension of the font veil. This ornament, here of great size looking like a large dark curtain, is shown in an engraving dated 1824, from which we can only assume that it survived until that time. The other great East Anglian covers, as far as the writer's experience goes, terminate in such a way as to make the use of any sort of veil unlikely. But there are other covers, some of them not so large, with which it is hard indeed to see how the veil could be used. So too in the case of many of the covers of the cupboard type, fixed over the font and opening with doors.

With the majority of font covers in the country there would, of course, be no such difficulty in the use of the veil. It is not easy, therefore, to explain the silence of the inventories in so many areas regarding them, although, of course the Edwardian inventories are notoriously untrustworthy where omissions are concerned.

In most cases the veil appears to have hung over the font cover and must have been gathered and tied at the top of it. It may be useful to examine the type of font cover usual in the area where it survived. This was pointed or ogee-shaped in outline, usually octagonal and of no great height. The font at Luccombe is of a very usual fifteenth-century octagonal type with quatrefoiled panels around the basin, somewhat smoothed at a restoration which took place in 1840. At that time an octagonal cover in the Gothic style was provided, with crockets on the angles and at the top which may well have been a copy of the older one. It is not unlike the original fifteenth-century example which still remains in the neighbouring church of Old Cleeve. Luccombe church underwent one of the drastic restorations characteristic of the evangelical revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The incumbent at that time, Thomas Fisher, appears to have been an extremist of a type rare in that district, for he destroyed a fine ancient stained-glass window described by James Savage as recently as 1830 in his *History of the Hundred of Carhampton* as still existing; while a few fragments escaped, the bulk of it is said to have been buried in the rectory garden. To him is probably due the disuse of the font veil at Luccombe.

The later covers followed the same general form: there is an early seventeenth-century example at Crowcombe, and a large late seventeenth century one in Exeter Cathedral; the former has straight sides, the latter an ogee curve outline. Both are typical of their time.

In some cases an outer canopy of honour is found in addition to the font cover, and might be regarded as a substitute for the veil, as at Swymbridge and Pilton in North Devon, and in another form at Trunch in Norfolk, beside the stone canopy at Luton. After the Reformation there is the splendid example given by Bishop Cosin to Durham Cathedral.

¹ See article by Francis Bond and F. C. Eden, in *Fonts and Font Covers*, 283, 285.

THE FONT VEIL SINCE THE REFORMATION

We now turn to other evidence for the use of the font cloth or veil in England since the Reformation.

It would seem as if the font veil for some reason or other was not an object of special Puritan dislike, probably because its significance had become forgotten. At Eversholt in Bedfordshire in 1552 is the strange entry 'An awter clothe of grene sylke which is a coverynge for the funte'.¹ In the early years of Elizabeth, when a wave of violent Puritanism swept over parts of England, a Lincolnshire document recording the destruction of ornaments in a really malicious manner refers to the actual making of font veils when they were destroying most other things. It is true that at Branston they sold one, but at Braceby there is a reference to 'an alb—whereof is made a coveringe for or font A° 1565'. At Rippingale we find 'a sarce-nett clothe defaced and coverynge made for our communion table and for the fonte,' and at Sempringham 'ij albes whereof we have made clothes for the communion table and the funt'.²

In the Elizabethan accounts of Braunton, near Barnstaple, the font veil is mentioned. In the Churchwarden's accounts of the great Devonshire church of Cullompton in 1613, and also in 1616-17, we find in an inventory: 'Item ij fonte cloths.'

At the same period in the north of Cornwall, at Tresmere, in a Terrier of 1613, is the following:

'We have surplusses with sleeves, a font of stone with a cover and a Linen Clothe belonging to the same, a convenient Communion Table with a carpit of Sylke and a fair Linen Cloathe belonging to the same table. A communion Cuppe of Sylver and a cover agreeable to the same, a Convenient Bottell to containe the wine prepared for the Lord's Table.'³

In 1630 a font of silver was ordered to be provided at the Chapel Royal, St. James's Palace, 'and over the Font a fair bell canopy with a rich valence', also that 'the Font is to be covered with a fine linen cloath until the time of Baptism'.⁴

In the *Canons and Constitutions Ecclesiasticall . . . for the Government of the Church of Scotland*, Aberdeen, 1636 cap. xvi, §2, 31, it is ordered that:

'For ministering the Sacrament of BAPTISME, a Font shall be prepared, and placed somewhat neare the entrie of the Church, as ancientlie it used to bee: with a Cloath of fine Linnen, which shall lykewyse bee kept to that vse allanerlie.'

At Easingwold, in Yorkshire, a font cloth is mentioned in an inventory of the same date.⁵ In the Churchwardens account of St. Ives, Cornwall, in 1650 is the entry '6 font cloths' among various coverings for the altar.

In the terrier of 1727 of St. Columb Major we find 'one font cloth'.⁶

Most important of all, at a later period, we have the following evidence of its existence in the Lands' End district. In a Terrier of Madron, the mother church of Penzance, of 1727, is the following:

'The furniture of the Church is: Three bells, a Parish chest, a parish Bier, a Pulpit cloth and cushion, a carpet for Communion Table, three Prayers-books, a Bible, a book of Homilies, a linen cloth for the desk, for the Font, for the Communion Table, for the

¹ F. C. Eeles, *Edwardian Inventories for Bedfordshire*, Alcuin Club Collection, vi, (1905).

² Edward Peacock, *English Church Furniture at the Period of the Reformation* (London, 1866).

³ Quoted in *Tresmeer, Treneglos and Tremaine* by Richard Crookshank (Launceston, 1941).

⁴ Edgar Sheppard, *Memorials of St. James's Palace* (London, 1894), II, 29.

⁵ *The Antiquary*, viii, 248.

⁶ C. Henderson, *St. Columb Major Church and Parish* (1930), 71.

Eucharist, a Flagon and Salver of Tin, a Silver Chalice weighing 10 oz., with the inscription : Paternus, dated 1576, a silver Paten weighing 1½ oz.'

The parochial chapels of Morvah on the north coast, and of St. Mary, Penzance, are also covered by this document, thus :

'The furniture of the chapel of Morvah is a bell, parish chest, a parish bier, pulpit cloth and cushion, two Prayer-Books, a Bible, a carpet for the communion table, a pulpit cloth and cushion, and a linen cloth for the desk, for the font, for the eucharist.'

The late Canon H. R. Jennings, vicar of Madron, writing to me in 1926, says :

'The Madron Terrier for 1821, also mentions the linen font cloth, and in 1825 they bought a new one : "A new cloth for the font 5s."'

'In Murray's *Guide to Cornwall* (1865), it is stated that the Font is "always covered with a white fringed linen napkin, a very old custom in the parish".'

'I have not been able to find any tradition about it nor when the custom was given up.'

From this evidence we gather that the custom went on in West Cornwall till about the time when we have evidence that it still continued in the Exmoor area.

We may note that with the exception of Luccombe, at the very western extremity of the Diocese of Bath and Wells, St. Gregory, Sudbury, Suffolk, and Easingwold in Yorkshire, all these cases are in the old diocese of Exeter.

Careful enquiry in out of the way places in other parts of England has failed to elicit any tradition about the survival of this ornament.

THE USE OF THE FONT VEIL ABROAD

In the instructions of St. Charles Borromeo, issued in accordance with a decree of the Third Council of Milan in 1573 is the following order :

De conopeo

Conopoeum ad ciborium totum contegendum adhibeatur : idque a serico aut subserico coloris albi sit : qui color mysterii huius Sacramenti rationibus respondet ; non tamen e tela decenti ejusdem coloris vetatur.¹

The veil does not, however appear to be confined to the Ambrosian rite, though its principal area of survival on the continent seems to be the north of Italy. Strangely enough the veil is not mentioned in the rubrics of the *Rituale Ambrosianum*.

An eighteenth-century representation of a baptism (pl. XIV), one of a series showing the seven Sacraments is apparently of Venetian origin. The rite is presumably the Roman though it may be a local variation. The sponsor holds the child as in the Roman use instead of the officiant holding it as in England both in and since the middle ages. The priest pours the water from a small metal basin. He wears a clumsy short Italian stole of the period. His surplice and that of the server are very ample and of a curious chasuble-like sleeveless type once common in North Italy. The font is like many of our Renaissance fonts : the wooden cover is raised and the veil is raised with it, turned back on either side, so as to give access to the water.

The late Miss Nancy Farren, a former Assistant Secretary of the Central Council for the Care of Churches, describing the font at Ceriana, near San Remo, wrote that the church was dated 1633, with the font standing in a baptistery and covered with a plain white veil, like an extinguisher, hiding everything but the stem and base of the font.

Dom Aelred Watkin, editor of Archdeaconry of Norwich Inventory of

¹ *Instruct. fabr. eccles. lib. i. cap., xix. Acta Ecclesiae Mediolanensis, Bergomi (1738), 579.*

Church Goods t. Edward III, Norfolk Record Soc. 1948, ii 77 records seeing it in use at Ciampene in Italy 1947, and Rolleboise near Mantes, 1948.

A certain number of reference to the font veil are to be found in some continental rituals of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The earlier books of this kind have little in the way of rubrics when compared with what we possess in the Sarum Manual, and it is not till later that the font and its arrangements are described. Some of the French books give very full instructions, and in a few of these the font veil is mentioned. At Langres in 1679 and at Bordeaux in 1728 it may be of stuff or linen. At Toul in 1700 it may be of white with a red fringe or mixed white and red. At Amiens in 1784 it is to be violet. Circumstances have not made it possible to refer to many of the Low Country or German books, but the following are references I have found up to date :

ALET

Il faut qu'il y ait sur le cuve des fonts un couvercle bien propre fermant a clef. . . . On pourroit le garnir par le dedans d'une étoffe, pour empecher qu'il n'y entre point d'ordure. *Les instructions du Rituel du diocese d'Alet*, 1669 (Paris, 1719), 25.

LANGRES

Extrinsecus vero sit in strato tapete, aut velo lineo, et appensa desuper cortina seu umbella decenter ornatum. *Rituale Lingonense* (Lingonis, 1679), 11.

TOUL

Les Fonts baptismaux ainsi placez et disposez seront couverts d'un tapis d'étoffe blanche avec une frange rouge ou melée de rouge et de blanc ; et ils seront enfermez par une balustrade de sept pieds de hauteur ; scavoir, trois pieds de lambris par le bas, trois pieds de balustre, et un pied de corniche.

Rituel de Toul (Toul, 1700), 27.

BORDEAUX

Les Fonts Baptismaux seron si bien couverts . . . il y aura pour cet effet sur le couvercle un tapis ou un linze fait exprés, et ils seront fermez à clef.

Rituel Romain . . . pour l'usage du diocese de Bordeaux (*Bordeaux*, 1728), 15.

AMIENS

Fonts . . . seront fermes d'une clef . . . et environnés d'une balustrade, et couverts d'une Pyramide, ou au moins, d'un tapis propre et, autant que faire se pourra, de couleur violette.

Rituel de diocese d'Amiens (Amiens, 1784,) 25.

LISIEUX, SEES, STRASBOURG, ROUEN

Decenti atiquo tapete cooperiantur sacri fontes et cancellis circumdentur.

Rituale Lexoviense, Parisiis, 1744, 15.

Rituale Sagiense, Parisiis, 1744, 15.

Rituale Argentinense, Argentinae, 1824, 13.

Rituale Rothomagense, Rothomagi, 1844, 13.

From all the evidence collected here we may gather that the font veil was usually of white linen, but sometimes of silk and sometimes coloured, that it was often fringed at the edge and that it hung over the font cover like an extinguisher. It was not universal but it was on the whole more used with the simpler type of font cover. It survived the Reformation and was in use in some places in the diocese of Exeter, while single examples existed in Bath and Wells and Norwich (now St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich), until about a hundred years ago. It is also apparent that while not provided for in the Roman rite, it is used in North Italy and was to be found elsewhere on the continent until comparatively recently.

Out of use at the moment in the Church of England, it is nevertheless an ornament of undoubted legality, and one that could be properly revived at any time.