

## Derbyshire Fonts.

By G. LE BLANC SMITH.



THE following does not pretend to be in any way original, but is written with the intention of illustrating and comparing several early fonts in Derbyshire, and, it is to be hoped, of classifying them in order of date.

### THE FONT AT WILNE.

The Saxon-worked stone, in which this font is hollowed, originally formed the base of what must have been a fine example of one of the numerous cylindrical crosses which are to be found in Derbyshire, Cheshire, and Lancashire. Similar instances may be seen at Melbury Bubb in Dorsetshire, Dolton, Devon, and Penmon, Anglesey.\*

The Rev. G. F. Browne (now Bishop of Bristol), in Volume VII. of this *Journal*, p. 185, gives a most lucid and interesting description of the specimen at Wilne. The font is remarkable for its total absence of the well-known knot and interlaced work, what interlacing there is being in the somewhat unusual form of dragons or large birds. In this it may be compared to that, of later date, at Bridekirk, Cumberland. The rubbing of Bishop Browne (Vol. VII., plate 13) shows these very distinctly, far more so than the font itself. The writer has twice endeavoured to see them on the font, but the fact that the lower part of the cross is reversed perhaps complicates the inspection, for the result on each occasion was without avail.

\* *The Reliquary*, October, 1902, p. 243.

The photograph shows the south-east side and the base, which has a broad beading or moulding round it, and upon which the font was mounted in Norman times. In all, there are six compartments, all of which, with the sole exception of that on the left of the photograph, contain the aforesaid dragons or bird-like creatures. It will be noticed that below these six compartments there is a plain border, and below which again are



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FONT AT WILNE.

six little panels which were once supposed to contain runes. These runes, as Bishop Browne demonstrated, are nothing more nor less than the inverted feet of men, the bottom of whose tunics are just to be seen. Between the compartments on the upper part are rude pillars having, to coin a new word, fleur-de-lys-like capitals; one is to be seen in the centre of the photograph, upside down, of course. These columns have been

compared by the same writer in Vol. VIII. of the *Journal* with those at Ilam, in Staffordshire, but the similarity is not apparent. The original cross of which the font at Wilne is composed must have been a magnificent example. Some idea of its proportions may be arrived at by a comparison with Clulow Cross, near Macclesfield, which is 9 ft. 4 ins. high, and one of the largest extant of its class; yet the diameter of Clulow is but 21 ins., whereas that of Wilne was 27 ins.; or with the Saxon cross at Stapleford, five miles from Wilne, the base of which is similarly elliptical and very nearly of the same dimensions.

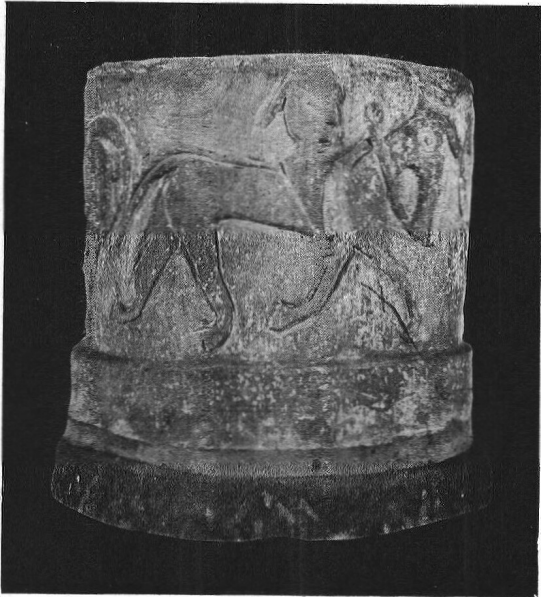
Bishop Browne suggests that the figures whose lower extremities are to be seen were, possibly, the four Evangelists, St. Chad (the patron saint of the church), and Our Lord, but, of course, this is pure conjecture. He gives the dimensions as 82 ins. in girth at the top, and 77 ins. at the bottom, with a height of about 23 ins. Fonts strikingly resembling this in general feature, but without any ornamentation, are not uncommon. A local example of Norman date is to be seen at Brassington.

The original cross was probably of much the same stamp as the smaller of the two crosses now standing in the churchyard at Ilam. This latter is circular below, tapering towards a band of projecting moulding about one-third of its height from the ground. Above this the shape is oblong, the longer sides facing East and West. At about two-thirds of its height from the ground is another band of moulding, above which is a very short-limbed cross head, much weather-worn. The carving on this cross, however, is of the interlaced variety.

Where and when the Wilne cross originally stood are subjects for interesting speculation. Speaking of it and others of similar design, Mr. Romilly Allen, F.S.A., says, "Judging from the relative number of monuments of this class in each county, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the type had its origin in Cheshire or Staffordshire, and it is therefore Mercian rather

than Northumbrian."\* Bishop Browne assigns it to a much earlier period than that of the Ilam example, and, apart from its workmanship, there seems every probability that it is an early specimen. We have evidence in its present base that it was already converted to a font in Norman times, and it is improbable that this would occur until either the cross had fallen into decay or its memories and associations had been effaced by time.

THE NORMAN FONT AT MELLOR.



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FONT AT MELLOR.

This is but little removed from the Saxon period; in fact there is nothing distinctively Norman about it except that there is no attempt at intertwining the animals with knot work and stiff foliage.

\* *Chester Archaeological Journal*, v. 145.

The photograph reproduced shows the side facing east, but the font stands in a very obscure position, and a better result was hopeless. To add to the difficulties of observation, a semi-circular wall has been built at the back, or west, of the font, which most effectually prevents a thorough examination being made or photograph of that side taken. A brass tap, green and old, projects from the side on the north-west.

On the side illustrated is a rude carving of a fore-shortened figure riding a very long-nosed horse, which has a large protruding eye, and a long drooping ear hanging over its forehead, giving it a most dejected look. On the south is a sort of lion-like animal with a long curly tail; it is so sketchily carved that it might be a bull. The other subjects, of which there are two, cannot be clearly seen, but one appears to resemble a pig. The whole was probably intended to represent a hunting scene.

Grotesque animals were popular Norman eccentricities. Very similar figures of the lion, bull, and pig type are to be found on various tympana throughout the country, and in Derbyshire at Hognaston, Parwich, and Ashford-in-the-Water, while figures similarly fore-shortened are also at Tissington and Hognaston on the tympana, of which Derbyshire has a rich selection.

The font, of which it is quite out of the question to give a further account, is placed on two steps, stands at the west end of the wide nave, and is lined with lead.

#### THE NORMAN FONT AT TISSINGTON.

There is a most striking resemblance between the font at Tissington and that at Mellor, both in shape and general ornamentation. Rumour has it that Derbyshire had yet another specimen of this type, in the font at Thorpe, the parish adjacent to Tissington, but want of forethought, and gross disregard for objects of a sacred nature, allowed it to be exposed to the inclemency of the weather, with the result that the outer shell of the stone peeled off. It is now quite plain but for two modern

lines which are incised round it. The font at Tissington nearly suffered the same fate, as for years it lay uncared for in the churchyard.

The shape is circular, much damaged at the top, and with lumps of plaster inserted on the western side. Our photograph shows the eastern face. On it, beginning on the right, is a bird, which, judging from its beak, appears to be of the hawk family. Only one leg and no wings are to be seen.



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FONT AT TISSINGTON.

Behind it, and in the centre of the photograph, is a creature which in all probability is a lion. The thick, sturdy neck is evidently intended to represent its mane. It has two forelegs, the right foot of which is supplied with three claws, which are more like the talons of a bird of prey. It is looking over its shoulder at its tail, which is brought up between its hind legs. These also terminate in claws. On the tympanum at Parwich,

near to, is a tail almost exactly similar. This finishes the ornamentation of the eastern face. The side facing west is quite filled up with a huge dragon or other fabulous animal. It has a large head, resembling that of a lion, two forelegs and tail, which in proportion would be twelve or fourteen feet long, and is looped round the hinder extremity of its body. There are no hind legs.

It is really impossible to give a fuller or more lucid description, as it is much too quaint and grotesque to allow any serious attempt at identification of the subject. Round the base is a bold semi-circular moulding, while the whole stands on a square block of stone. It is lead lined, and placed in the centre of the nave.

It should be remembered that these two curious fonts are in a district which bounded a royal hunting forest in Norman times.