

Derbyshire Fonts.

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(Photographs by the Author.)

TRANSITIONAL-NORMAN AND EARLY ENGLISH PERIODS.



DERBYSHIRE can only claim, with any certainty, two specimens of fonts of the Transitional-Norman period, these being at Winster and Ffenny Bentley. Of these two the former is by far the more interesting, for it combines work of some hundreds of years after the date of its actual construction.

WINSTER. FIGS. 1, 2, 3.

This font is really made in two parts, the bowl and the pedestal, or shaft, both being of separate stones. The bowl is circular in plan, divided into eight panels by straight lines of moulding; these lines of moulding are continued on the shaft, which is octagonal, forming the edges of each side.

It is a most puzzling font as to date, for there are so many ornaments of a varied nature and of a style which might make it range from 1200 to 1500 in date. The basis, however, of the whole thing seems to be the short period of Transition which followed the wealth of the late Norman work. The Norman had now so far advanced his work and improved his powers of sculpture that his masses of oft-repeated, ornate details were fast becoming wearisome from their frequent repetition. At this time the Early English style—English as opposed to the Romanesque influence of the Norman—began to make its appearance. The immediate result of this was

to introduce an element of nature into the foliage, the origin of which the Norman seemed to have entirely forgotten in his efforts to secure wealth of detail, and make any natural form bend and shape itself to his requirements. In this font, therefore, we have at the top of the bowl a cable; this looks like Norman work. Round the base of the bowl are curious well-

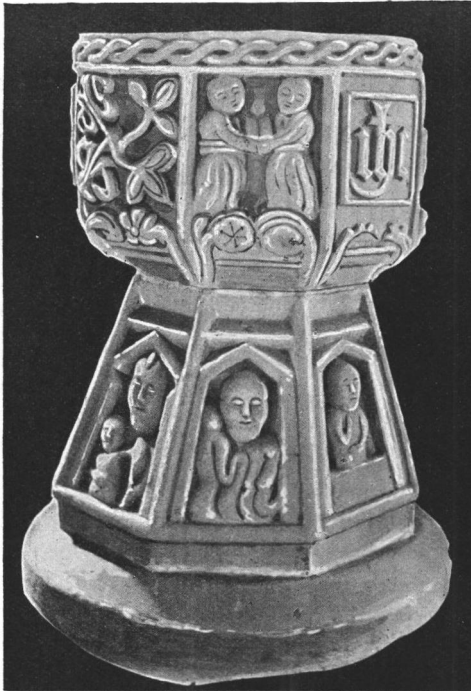


Fig. 1.—Font at Winster.

rounded leaf forms, having just that touch of nature about them which suggests Transitional-Norman work; on the left of fig. 1 is a panel filled with foliage, leaves and buds, which is distinctly Early English in style; on the right of fig. 1 and left of fig. 2 are panels of what is usually called "Black-letter." Black-letter was the name given, as late as the seventeenth

century, to the printing type which was imitated from the caligraphy of the fifteenth century. All the early books—such as those of Caxton—are printed in this style of type. During the sixteenth century, black-letter, as it was called a century later, died out.

On the bowl of this font, therefore, are portions of sculpture illustrating the work of the Norman, Transitional-Norman, Early English, and Perpendicular styles, apparently. Now it is very evident that it cannot belong to four different styles at once, therefore it is most likely that it was carved at a time which embraced the Norman and Early English styles, viz., the Transitional-Norman, and that it was left unfinished, as appears to this day, and some of the blank panels were filled with ornaments of Perpendicular date.

In describing the ornament, I will begin with the left-hand side of the bowl in fig. 1.

First is a panel of leaf-forms, having a strong Early English appearance; beneath are two buds. On the right of this panel (centre of fig. 1) are two curious skirted human beings holding a book between them; intended, possibly, for angels singing. On the right of fig. 1 is a square label containing the letters I.H.S. in "black-letter." Beneath are two oak leaves.

Continuing the description of the bowl in fig. 2:—On the left is the well-known "Chi rho" monogram of Christ somewhat altered by the addition of the "iota," which is "dotted" over the "rho." The simple "Chi rho" monogram has been a feature, though not a strong one, of English symbolic sculpture ever since Romano-British days.

On the right of the monogram is a curious conventional arrangement of leaf forms in a square, with hollow centre; below, as in the previous panel, are two budding leaves.

On the extreme right of fig. 2 is a sunk square panel enclosing a human head. I have considerable doubts as to whether this is Transitional-Norman or not, and rather incline to the belief that it is much later. Beneath are two buds.

Continuing in fig. 3:—On the right of the afore-mentioned head is a panel containing the letters I.H.S. again; the usual two buds, but weakly carved, are beneath this panel.

On the extreme right of fig. 3 is a curious little child's head and shoulders, in a sunk square panel, shrouded up to the chin. Beneath are two well-cut buds.



Fig. 2.—Font at Winstar.

The two-strand cable encircles the whole of the top of the bowl, while every panel has beneath it the curious little buds, of which similar instances may be seen on Early English crockets.

The base is very curiously carved, and is octagonal in plan; beginning on the right, fig. 1, is:—

Beneath a pointed-headed panel a representation, to all appearances, of the Blessed Virgin and Child. The Virgin,

if such she be, has a curious little projection in the centre of the forehead.

In the centre of fig. 1 is a quaint figure, beneath a painted panel, wrapped up to the neck in clothes. Can this be the Infant Christ in the manger?



Fig. 3.—Font at Winsters.

In the next panel, on the right of fig. 1, is the half-length body of a child in a font.

Now the juxtaposition of these three figure-filled panels suggests that they may be scenes from the early life of Our Lord, up to and including His Baptism, viz., the Nativity, the

Manger, and His Baptism. The two singing angels above should be taken in conjunction with these three panels.

On fig. 2 on the left is a plant, possibly a lily, growing *out of the ground*.

The next three panels are blank, and then we get another lily growing *out of a pot*; the symbol of the Virgin Mary.



Fig. 4.—Font at Ffenny Bentley.

The blank panels of this font seem to have been much too zealously scraped.

The possibility of its being of Transitional-Norman date is further heightened by the fact that there was in the church, before it was so scandalously destroyed, a very fine Transitional-Norman doorway.

The next font, in order of date, to be noticed is that of

FFENNY BENTLEY. FIG. 4.

This is a remarkably rude specimen of very late Norman workmanship, for the carvers of Transitional days seemed to have secured more or less complete mastery over their tools. It is most unlikely that this font is earlier in date than the specimen at Winster.

The Rev. Richard K. Bolton, writing in *The Reliquary* for 1900, says:—

“The font is the despair of archæologists. Its only carving is a five-leaved fleur-de-lys, and it seems to me to be Norman, though defaced in the other panels, probably by Cromwell’s Commissioners.”

What there is to “despair of” in this font it is hard to imagine; it is also equally difficult to guess why a lily in a pot—the symbol of the Blessed Virgin Mary—should be described as “a five-leaved fleur-de-lys.” It certainly is not the living image of a lily, but it cannot be said to resemble the “fleur” in the least. Fig. 4.

The base, on which this lily is carved very deeply, has other equally deep depressions in its sides, which do not seem to have ever been otherwise than they are now, *i.e.*, plain and bare.

The bowl is very irregularly surfaced and may have been maltreated, though of this there is no absolute proof.

EARLY ENGLISH PERIOD.

The Early English period must now be considered, as to this period belong two fonts of which Derbyshire may well be proud, *viz.*, Ashbourne and Norton. Other somewhat similar instances are at Bradley, Kniveton, Norbury, and Doveridge,* all near the valley of the Dove, and much resembling that at Ashbourne rather than that at Norton.

The extraordinary dissimilarity between the Norman and Early English styles is one of the curious points of our ecclesiastical architecture; the Transitional-Norman style did

* There are, of course, other specimens, of but little interest, which are scattered about the county.

but little to bridge over this gulf, so here we get a series of fonts of a style which no Norman could have foreseen would, to a certain degree, evolve itself from his work.

The majority of these Early English fonts in Derbyshire are mere copies of the beautiful clustered shafts of the church



Fig. 5.—Font at Norton.

builders, of an inverted bell shape. Architecturally and artistically the specimen at Ashbourne is the finest, but the greatest interest attaches to that at Norton, which will be described first.

NORTON. FIG. 5.

This specimen does not quite come up to that at Ashbourne in architectural merit, owing to the octagonal plan of the

bowl, but in the symbolism of the result of Baptism it far exceeds it.

The bowl is ornamental, with sort of ogee-shaped arcades, superimposed. The North, West, and South sides are ornamented with a winged angel's head; a head and some foliage; and some characteristic Early English foliage respectively. On the East side is a curious lizard-like creature known as the salamander. An example of this little reptile has already been met with on the font at Youlgreave, which was described in Vol. xxvi. of this *Journal*.

The salamander was popularly supposed to be a denizen of the fire, and its presence here may be fairly accounted for by the fact that it was intended to symbolise fire; the fire of fires; the denizen of that fire of fires; *i.e.*, the Devil.

It will be noticed that in nearly every case where this salamander occurs it has a look of most intense disgust and loathing on its face; this, no doubt, is meant to typify the disgust which the Devil feels at the Sacrament of Baptism, by the agency of which he is cast out; and we thus see him crawling away, painfully and disgustedly, from his deadly enemy, the Water of Baptism.

The invariable characteristics of this curious little creature, as carved by the early mediæval artists, were the long tail with one curl in it (often bifurcated), the humped back, wings, legs set on very far back, and its dragon-like head.

A list of fonts bearing the salamander has already been given under the head of that at Youlgreave in this *Journal*.

The presence of the salamander on this font should do away with the fallacy that it is only found on those of Norman date. A more undoubted example of the salamander and a better distinguished Early English font could not exist.

The clustered shafts which support the bowl are ornamented in their interstices with the "dog-tooth" ornament. The design is an adaptation from the Norman star ornament, which consisted of a cross or four-pointed star within a square border. Such a very geometrical arrangement did not suit the

Transitional-Norman artist and his successor of the Early English period at all, so to abolish the dividing line between each star and the next he made the star lie on a little pyramid, *i.e.*, he raised the centre, or meeting point of the rays, of the star much above the edges. This caused each star to throw a shadow which, to his mind, was far preferable, as a division, to the original line of the Norman star. The rays were then



Fig. 6.—Font at Ashbourne.

made more natural and foliage-like (the characteristic of the thirteenth century carver), and assumed the forms of petals; the dog-tooth was then evolved. This dog-tooth was *not* an exclusive ornament of the Early English period as was the "ball-flower" of the succeeding "Decorated" period. Its parentage was Norman, its early youth Transitional-Norman, and its mature middle-age and death-bed were Early English.

When one begins to analyse the Early English style, and note its principal points of beauty, it becomes most apparent that the secret of the whole thing is its lightness and airiness (possibly more noticeable owing to the sturdy Norman which preceded it), and its use of foliage as near and true to nature as the thirteenth century carver was capable of getting.



Fig. 7.—Font at Bradley.

Surely, then, this dog-tooth is much out of place; there is no real likeness to foliage in it, for it is far more of a geometrical pattern than anything else, yet it is one of the features of the Early English style, but not a feature of it alone, nor its only *feature*.

This font at Norton is the only one in the fairly representative list illustrated by Paley, which has this dog-tooth.

ASHBOURNE. FIG. 6.

This is a most beautifully designed, well-balanced example of that type of Early English font which was derived from the



Fig. 8.—Font at Kniveton.

clustered columns—including base and capital—which were such a successful and much admired feature of the churches of the thirteenth century.

Paley, in his *Baptismal Fonts*, gives a very bad illustration of it, and, by way of description, proceeds to discuss the date at which the church was dedicated to St. Oswald, *i.e.*, May 8th, 1241.

He also mentions the fact that the font in his day stood on the floor, being destitute of either base-stone or steps. This is now altered, and the font once more stands on these customary additions.

The bowl is round, but, where it approaches the beautiful capitals to the central pillar, it is gathered in at intervals, to correspond with the otherwise outstanding capitals.

The ornament consists of a very graceful ogee-shaped arcade of two orders, and, in the intervals between each arcade and the next, is a well-executed fleur-de-lys on a long stalk.

The shaft consists of eight clustered columns, with beautifully finished bases; in fact, the whole thing is as beautiful an example of Early English workmanship as can be imagined. It is very simple and well proportioned, and is, in fact, a type which might well be copied when a new font is required, for, as it is, the modern font is a hideous erection, as a rule, of glaring contrasts in coloured marbles and brass plates.

BRADLEY. FIG. 7.

The original carver of the Bradley font has made a shockingly bad attempt at copying the example at Ashbourne.

The beautiful ogee-shaped arcade has here given place to a terrible round-headed affair which is absolute ruination to any gracefulness which the font might otherwise possess. A similar arcade may be seen on the font at Irchester, Northants. The "fleurs" have been elaborately vulgarised in this font at Bradley, no longer having the delicacy of those at Ashbourne.

The absence of bases to the clustered shafts, which form the stem of this font, is much to be deplored, as whatever beauty there might have been is quite destroyed.

KNIVETON. FIG. 8.

Here again is a font which one may safely surmise was copied from that at Ashbourne, as it is of the same style, and near that place. It has on the S.E. side the date 1663. This obviously is not the date at which it was carved, being, most probably, the date at which it was restored to the church (the Norman font at Pentrich was similarly cut about the same

date). The bowl is a good specimen, but the tall, clustered columns forming the shaft are weakly set out, and much too tall in proportion; their capitals, too, are practically non-existent and the bases are shallow. The bowl is gathered in at the base as at Ashbourne, and the arcade is similar, but the "fleurs" are wanting.

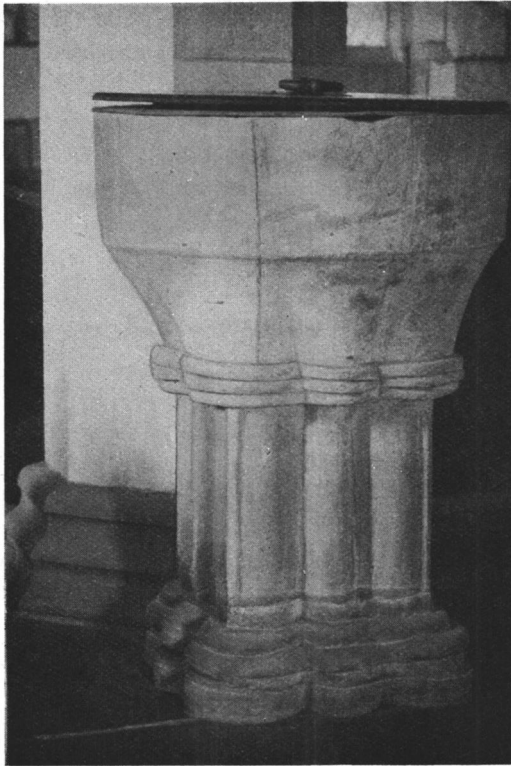


Fig. 9.—Font at Norbury.

NORBURY. FIG. 9.

This is a small font, but good in all its details. The bowl is plain and round at the top, being cut inwards below in order to properly taper to the capitals of the clustered columns forming the shaft.

These shafts, like those at Norton, are so arranged that they have a square plan, *i.e.*, they will fit inside a square drawn round them; the Ashbourne, Bradley and Kniveton examples have a circular plan, *i.e.*, they will fill a circular line drawn round their bases. The bases and capitals are very sound in design.

The font at Doveridge closely resembles that at Ashbourne. Those at Ashbourne, Norton, Bradley and Norbury are illustrated by Paley.

These Early English fonts are not very interesting on the whole, as there is that quaint carving missing which so characterised the Norman work, and, save for the salamander at Norton, there is no symbolic sculpture.

In the *Journal* of next year it is hoped to describe and illustrate some of the principal fonts of the Decorated period, which succeeded the Early English, including the fine and interesting examples of Bakewell and Bradbourne.