FONT OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY AT THE "HERMITAGE OF HONDESACRE," STAFFORDSHIRE.

By J. HEWITT.

On a rocky bank overhanging the Trent, with a rich sweep of the Trent valley before it, stood, in Anglo-Saxon times, the "Hermitage of Hondeshacre." In the twelfth century a Norman parish church took the place of the hermitage, which remained, with later additions, till about twenty years ago, when the building was renewed. The original Norman font, however, remains, of which drawings are here presented. The sculptures consist of seven groups, of two figures each, male and female; the men having moustaches and beards of various patterns, and the ladies exhibiting diversity of costume which none but an Anglo-Norman modiste could adequately describe. The lady No. 3 in the larger view appears to wear her hair parted down the middle. Lady No. 1 conceals her *chevelure* with a cap. The detached female figure has the well-known long tresses, of which a second sculptured example is offered by the queenly statue on the west door of Rochester cathedral.[1] Another of the ladies wears a crown fleur-de-lisée. Each couple of figures stands under a round arch, divided from the neighbouring group by a twisted column with cushion capital. The relief is low, and the workmanship rude: the material a light-coloured freestone. The shaft and base are renewals, and, from some unexplained cause, a portion of the old part has disappeared from below. The basin is lined with lead: its diameter is 2 ft., its depth 1 ft.; a capacity sufficient for the full ducking of the sturdiest Norman or Anglo-Saxon bantling that ever went by the way. The good old lady who exhibits the church was unable to tell the age of the font, but observed that

[1] The Queen of Henry I., engraved in the Monumental Effigies of Great Britain, by George and Thomas Hollis.

"it was there when hur come;" adding that "her oldest daughter was fifty-nine, and hur was christened in it."[2]

The hermitage of Hondeshacre is now called Armitage, and the adjacent hall and village of Hondeshacre are named Handsacre. Robert de Hondesacre held the manor in the time of William I. under the Bishop of Chester. Hence, suggests Shaw, the county historian, this Robert was "probably a native Saxon, left undisturbed by the Conqueror on these sacred Church lands" (vol. i. p. 207). In the time of Henry III. Thomas de Hondesacre was manumitted for the annual payment of a pair of white gloves or one halfpenny. At this period Sir William de Hondesacre seals with a hound salient (in allusion to his name). In the time of Henry IV. Sir William de Handsacre, on his way to Shrewsbury, to fight on the side of Hotspur, met with his neighbour, Sir Robert de Malveysin, who had set out to aid the king. Each immediately marshalled his followers, and a combat ensued, in which Handsacre was slain and his men routed. Malveysin went forward to Shrewsbury field, where he was himself killed. Then comes the old, old tale: the son of the slain Handsacre marries the heiress of the slain Malvoisin, her "purparty" is handed over to him "as a recompense for the death of his father," and they lived happily ever after.[3]

At various times gifts to the church of Armitage are recorded. The lords of Hondesacre gave one parcel of ground, "of the yearly value of 11*d.*, for a lamp to be maintained in the church for ever." Roger Braggs and Robert Cokeley gave lands for other lamps in the said church (Shaw's "Staffordshire," p. 210).

Shaw's "History" gives no account of the building of the church in the twelfth century, but, as usual in the old county histories, finds that "it bears many marks of early Saxon architecture."

The old half-timbered hall of Handsacre, with its moat, still exists, but of course has undergone much change: it is now a farm-house.

It may be remarked that this midland district appears to

[2] It is not unworthy of remark that, though total immersion has been so long supplanted by the pint basin, and the proper phrase would therefore now be "christened *at* the font," the old form of words still remains, and the children are always said to be christened *in* it.

[3] "Purpars, perpars: Portio hæreditaria." Ducange.

have been peculiarly given to hermitagery in the old time. Stafford, we are told, was anciently named Bethany, "à cause d'un Berthelin, hermite, qui avoit passé là sa vie en réputation de sainteté." At Lichfield St. Chad "led an eremetical life by the side of a brook near a clear spring." Near Tamworth is a place still named the Hermitage; and near Repton we have the curious rock temple called Anchor Church (Anchoret Church). An engraving of this last is given in "The Portfolio," a serial of the brothers Storer, well known for their work on the English cathedrals.

Several village churches in the neighbourhood of Armitage offer curious memorials. Close by is Maveysin-Ridware, containing sculptured effigies of the Malvoisins of the thirteenth century. At Longdon is much good and enriched work of the twelfth century. Elford is quite a gem for monumental effigies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Alrewas has good Norman work of the twelfth century, though of plain character. To Wichnor, famous for its Flitch of Bacon tenure, I was allured by the rumour of a mediæval monument in the church; but found the building in the hands of the masons, roof bare, ceiling down, doors locked, and the men gone home for the evening. All that could be done was to catechise the old lady of the contiguous cottage. Had any ancient monuments been found in the course of the works? At first the query did not penetrate the old lady's intelligences, but by dint of repetition and more vernacular diction her mind was equal to the occasion. Yes, a monument had been found. "Ah, good! and pray tell me what was it?" "Why, it was the Lion and the Unicorn."

Fonts bearing sculptured decorations that appear to be of a purely secular character, namely, neither allusive to the baptismal rite, nor even to any sacred or hagiotypic subject, are, it is believed, of very rare occurrence. In the renovated church at Dunkeswell, Devon, near the site of the monastery founded in 1201 by William Briwere, has been preserved a cylindrical font of very grotesque fashion, having around it several figures which seem to present no sacred allusion—a king, a bishop, an armed figure, and the like, possibly representing the Sovereign, the founder of the conventual house, with certain members of his family. At Wansford, Northamptonshire, may

be seen a cylindrical font, date about 1150, around which there are eight rudely carved figures, in an arcade of round-headed compartments, presenting considerable resemblance in design to the remarkable sculptured example at Armitage. The figures apparently represent two priests, also combatants, a female and a male. The font is raised on small columns; it is enriched with beautiful foliage and other decorations of Norman type. It is remarkable that the stone cylinder has been broken at about the same part where the lower part of that in Staffordshire is severed, and the cylinder deprived of its true proportions. At Wansford the fractured base, on which are carved the lower portion of the figures, has been preserved; the entire height of the cylinder is 22 in. A good engraving of this early example may be found in Simpson's "Series of Baptismal Fonts," published in 1858.

The cylindrical type is perhaps that of most frequent occurrence in the Norman period. There are, however, certain fonts of the twelfth century, of which that in Winchester Cathedral is a familiar example, where the square form has been adopted. Each of the sides is elaborately sculptured, and it is raised upon a massive round base, with a small column at each angle. The legend of St. Nicholas of Myra supplies the subjects of the carvings introduced on the rectangular sides of the bowl. In one of the fonts of this class, closely resembling that at Winchester, but existing in Belgium, at Zedelghem, near Bruges, we find the usual incidents of the story of St. Nicholas, also monstrous lions, figures in armour, ecclesiastics, &c.[4] On one of the sides there are six figures, in pairs, a male and a female in each, separated by little columns, forming an arcade. Of these couples two are in close embrace; in the third the lady seems to be urging some request, or in grief at the departure of the gentleman. The connection of these figures with the legend of the saint is not apparent; it may possibly be found in the dramatic mystery by Hilarius, a Benedictine poet about 1125, and of English origin. Whatever may be their significance, there seems curious analogy between the Armitage figures and the amorous couples at Zedelghem. The solution of the enigma must be left for the consideration of the student of mediæval symbolism.

[4] De Caumont, Bulletin Monumental, vol. xxi., 1856, p. 471.