



FONT IN THE PRIORY CHURCH OF ST. BARTHOLOMEW-THE-GREAT, WEST SMITHFIELD.

THREE PRE-REFORMATION FONTS IN LONDON.¹

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It is stated by some authorities that London still possesses three pre-reformation fonts.² No doubt exists respecting two of them, but it is not unlikely that the third may have been a holy-water stoup, or more probably a domestic mortar of Norman or early English date.

A rectangular Norman bowl may still be found in St. Dunstan's,³ Stepney, the mother-church of east London⁴ (plate II, no. 1). It has passed through many vicissitudes, and is now placed at the west end of the church. The bowl⁵ has been mounted on five modern pillars, a low plinth,⁶ and a chamfered base.⁷ These shafts probably occupy the position of the original supports. The large central shaft is stone,⁸ but it is unfortunate that the four smaller pillars are made of polished granite⁹ which are not in keeping with the original design. The bowl has been repaired in several places, and the two sides,¹⁰ now facing north and south, were probably never decorated, but left quite plain and unadorned by the Norman masons. In modern times these have been ornamented with Maltese crosses inserted in circles and diaper patterns. The eastern and western faces, however, possess their original

¹ Part of this paper was read before the Institute, 1st April, 1914.

² See Bumpus, *London Churches*.

³ We learn from Matthew Paris that in the year 952 the church at Stepney was rebuilt by archbishop Dunstan, and dedicated by him to All Saints; after his death and canonisation the new church was rededicated to his memory.

⁴ This font is illustrated (p. 13), in *A picture-book of St. Dunstan's, Stepney*, by the Rev. G. C. Wilton, M.A.

⁵ The bowl is 2 feet 11 inches square, and the circular basin has a depth of 10 inches. Leaves and geometrical patterns are cut on the top of the four corners in the surface of the stone. This decoration was inserted at a later date.

⁶ 2 feet 8 inches by 2 feet 8 inches by 2 inches.

⁷ 3 feet 0½ inch by 3 feet 0½ inch by 6 inches.

⁸ The central shaft has a circumference of 4 feet 11 inches, and is 1 foot 3½ inches high. There is a roll (2 inches) at the top, and a moulded circular base 4 inches high and 6 feet 4 inches in circumference.

⁹ These four granite pillars possess a circumference of 1 foot 6½ inches, and are 1 foot 1½ inches high. The carved capitals (5½ inches) are stone, and the moulded circular base is 3 inches high and has a circumference of 2 feet 2 inches.

¹⁰ Pillars, bases, and capitals are 4 inches high, and the height of the arches is 3 inches. The depth of each face of this rectangular bowl is 9 inches.

decoration. The side facing the east has a moulded panel containing a plain interlacing arcade on eleven circular shafts having cushion capitals with circular bases and square plinths. The arcading on the side facing the west consists of seven round-headed arches supported on plain circular pillars.¹

Many fonts were broken up during the civil war, and where this was not done they were frequently desecrated by the Puritans.² It was not, however, until the Commonwealth expressly forbade their use that the great destruction took place. London churches must have lost many of their splendid mediaeval fonts at this period, and nearly all that remained disappeared in the great fire. It is, therefore, of special interest to record that the ancient font in the priory church of St. Bartholomew-the-Great, Smithfield (plate 1) is one of the very few pre-reformation fonts now existing in London.

A great restoration of this church took place from about 1400 to 1405, when the east end was remodelled and the clerestory of the quire, the greater part of the transepts and the chapter-house were rebuilt. The mouldings on the base of the font indicate that it may be a few years earlier than this date, but it is probable that it was placed in the church during the early part of the fifteenth century when these drastic changes were carried out.

Throughout the whole of the fourteenth century the designers of fonts sought after one common form, and they were nearly unanimous in making the bowl polygonal, and in raising it on a polygonal pedestal. Although this was a period of lavish adornment, before which the restraint of the thirteenth century had given way, yet the font made for this famous church is a stately octagonal bowl³ mounted

¹ This font is illustrated in Lyson's *Environs of London*, Hughson's *Walks in London* (1817), and *Time's Telescope* (1829). It is represented as a rectangular bowl supported on a central shaft and four detached corner pillars with circular bases and ornamented capitals. The plinth is square, and the cruciform step rests on a circular one.

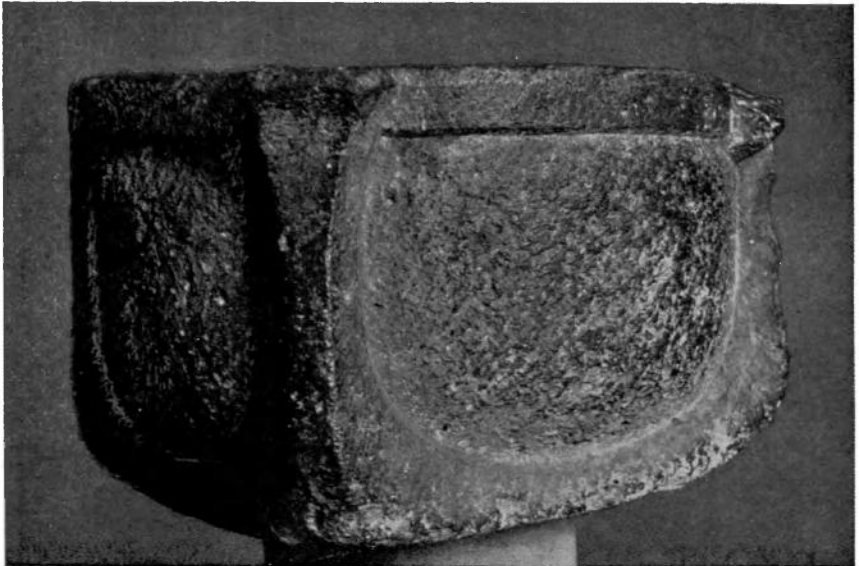
² A colt was baptised in the font in St.

Paul's; at Yaxley in Huntingdonshire a colt was also baptised in the font; while at Lostwithiel in Cornwall a horse was brought to the font and christened "Charles" in contempt of king Charles I.

³ Octagonal bowl with a plain chamfer, depth of interior 9½ inches; exterior 1 foot 3 inches; chamfer 5 inches; rim 4½ inches, with 6 inches at the corners; diameter 2 feet 1 inch.



NO. 1. FONT AT ST. DUNSTAN'S, STEPNEY.



NO. 2. PURBECK BOWL AT ST. ETHELDREDA'S, ELY PLACE.

on an octagonal pedestal¹ with a moulded plinth,² all of satisfactory and ample dimensions, but quite plain. It is strange to find a font so unadorned in an important church during an age when bowls decorated with blind window-tracery or canopied niches were in vogue. It may, however, have been painted and gilded, although no trace of colour is now discernible. The marks for the staples show that the font possessed a cover, and if it were a dignified canopy, painted and gilded, and rising like some graceful spire, the plainness of the font would be little observed.

An oblong cavity on one face of the bowl has been made resembling a matrix for a brass inscription.³ No record exists as to what was inserted, neither has it transpired who was the donor of the font. It was once condemned by the vestry, who intended to replace it by one of more elaborate workmanship, but fortunately it still remains.

It is interesting to note that William Hogarth, the celebrated satirist and painter, was born in the parish of St. Bartholomew, 10th December, 1697, and was baptised in this font. His father, originally a schoolmaster of Westmorland, was then established in London as a printer's reader.

The employment of Purbeck marble in architecture is well known, and from 1150⁴ to 1350 it was largely used for coffins, tombs, effigies, fonts, polished pillars, square paving-slabs, etc. The quarries at Corfe, in Dorset, belonged to the king, or at any rate were commandeered by him, and large blocks were conveyed to London by sea, and in the thirteenth century a craft of marblers was established in London.⁵

When the crypt under the chapel of St. Ethelreda, Ely Place, was undergoing restoration in 1874, a Purbeck marble vessel was discovered beneath a mass of concrete forming the base of one of the great chestnut posts that

¹ Octagonal pedestal with moulding $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches at top and bottom; height $12\frac{1}{2}$ inches; each face, $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

² Moulded plinth: each face, $12\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $12\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

³ $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches by $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

⁴ Purbeck marble was used in 1150 in bishop Pudsey's new buildings at Durham,

and it is conjectured by the authors of *Mediaeval figure-sculpture in England* that it was shipped from Corfe by way of London, as records state that it came from "over sea." About 1180 Purbeck marble was employed in considerable quantity in the Temple church, London.

⁵ See Prior and Gardner, *Mediaeval figure-sculpture in England*, p. 351.

supported the roof. This vessel is a plain circular bowl¹ with four rib-like² projections on the outside and a band³ around the top. The upper portion is circular, but the lower part forms a rough rectangle.⁴ Some authorities believed that this vessel was a font of early workmanship, and attributed it to the Saxon period. The bowl, however, was too small in dimension for an ancient font, and the internal diameter was only 1 foot $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches; and, withal, it possessed no drain. It is quite possible that it may have been used for a stoup, but its general shape and appearance suggests the probability that it was a domestic mortar used in the palace of the bishop of Ely. The vessel is now lead-lined, and being mounted on a circular pedestal⁵ is converted into a holy-water stoup.

This ancient Purbeck marble vessel was probably made during the thirteenth century, either by the quarrymen at Corfe in their local workshops, or by the band of marblers who were at that date established in London to work blocks of Purbeck marble sent to the capital from the king's quarries in Dorset.

¹ The top of the bowl has a circumference of about 5 feet 10 inches, and the rectangular bottom is about 1 foot 6 inches square. Internal diameter 1 foot $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches; depth of bowl (outside) 1 foot 1 inch, (inside) 10 inches; rim $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

² These ribs are about $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches to 4 inches wide, and project about 2 inches. One has been seriously mutilated and cut away.

³ Band $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches in depth.

⁴ About 1 foot 6 inches square.

⁵ This modern pedestal is 9 inches high, a circumference of 2 feet 11 inches, and a circular base of $5\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The square moulded plinth measures 1 foot 7 inches by 9 inches.

⁶ The vessel is large for a domestic mortar, though it resembles one in appearance. Being lead-lined the interior cannot now be examined.