

NOTES

A medieval piscina from the grounds of St. Nicholas Church, Whitehaven, Cumbria.

CLIVE R. BOWD

This report deals with the find of a medieval piscina in the gardens of the church of St. Nicholas in Lowther Street, Whitehaven, Cumbria in 2003. The circumstances of the find along with its conservation, identification and exhibition are outlined below.

Initial identification and interpretation

THAT this piece is a medieval piscina that was once used for rinsing the chalice and paten following the mass is not in doubt. What is in doubt is the period in which the piscina was made. At first sight a late twelfth-century date could be allocated, but the inclusion of the portrait (if the interpretation is right) points to a slightly later period. From the style of headdress worn and the execution of the portrait, a date in the late thirteenth century through into the first half of the fourteenth century is more probable. This date period accords well with the style and execution of the piece when compared to other such pieces, including portable mortars, and the manner in which they were made, (C. Bowd. 2001). As to the lettering on the left side, this could be contemporary with the making of the piece, the cross also. The W might be a masons' mark, but if it does indeed form part of a set of initials then it is more likely those of the benefactor who had the piscina made. The cross could be a dedication cross, or a pilgrim's cross, the latter carved in thanks for a safe return home. From the inferior quality and ephemeral nature of the hatching on the right side, this would seem to be a later graffito of uncertain purpose.

The piece shows considerable weathering indicating that it has stood out in the open for some time, or was exposed to the elements. Of particular interest is the amount of wear on the rear rim where little or none should be. When used in its normal setting, "a piscina is usually set within a fenestella (a canopied niche) in the south wall of the PRESBYTERY" (S. Friar, 1996). The wear and later graffiti would suggest the piece has seen a secondary use in which it was subject to physical abuse prior to being set into the flowerbed in the church grounds, perhaps in a smithy used in quenching small objects and horseshoes?

Circumstances of the find

The author first noticed the find early in 2003 when undertaking some research in the grounds of the former St. Nicholas Church (built 1883, destroyed by fire in August 1971). Located set into the flowerbed to the left (facing) of the main door to the tower and ruins now used as a community centre, all that was visible was the rim, the piece being used for planting and to secure the edging stones of the border at the corner. Due to the bowl being filled with soil, no certain identification could be made

at the time as to what the piece was, or even if it was complete, therefore I drew it to the attention of the staff at the centre with the recommendation it be uplifted for examination and possible future display within the heritage part of the centre.

I returned in July to follow up on my discovery. Unfortunately by this time the rim of the piece had become dislodged and was lying to one side, the whole showing signs of degradation. A quick examination showed that the lower portion of the artefact appeared to be intact. I therefore arranged to return later that day and lift the stone with a view to conserving it for future display within the safety of the heritage area on site. Upon excavation it became apparent that we had here a virtually complete medieval piscina, albeit in several pieces and in a fragile condition. I lifted the pieces and transferred them to the safety of the tower to allow them to air-dry prior to being conserved and recorded.

Condition of the stone and conservation

The stone from which the piece is made had become water saturated from lying in the flowerbed. This in turn had led to mechanical agencies upon the stone effectively splitting it apart, (freeze thaw action from winter ice and wet cold/hot cycles from sun, wind and rain). The stone had separated into ten pieces, mainly along the original bedding planes. The surfaces thus exposed were very friable. The stone was allowed some seven weeks to air-dry, this meant that the pieces were given time to acclimatise to their new location and equilibrium to be achieved slowly. The aim now was to consolidate the broken surfaces, prior to reassembling the pieces, so as to enable the artefact to be handled and moved as required. No attempt was made to restore the stone completely, any missing fragments and the resultant cavities being left void.

Description of the stone

The piscina is made from a block of pale yellow/white sandstone and measures 25cms high x 28cms wide x 27.5cms deep maximum. The basin is centrally placed, being 20cms in diameter x 13cms deep with a concave bottom. A drain hole, hourglass in profile, shows it was made after the basin had been excavated, it being bored from both sides. This drain hole is 5cms across tapering down to 2cms in the middle and exits 10cms up from the base of the stone in the middle of the rear elevation. In plan the stone is basically square with the front corners rounded off. The rim is 3.5cms wide, the diagonals 9cms at the rear and 7cms at the front. Damage has been sustained to the front left corner (facing), the patina telling us this is an old break, as is the



FIG. 1. Whitehaven. Piscina. Front view showing female figure on right.

fracture line emanating from this point. The rim exhibits a lot of wear, particularly on the rear elevation. All exposed surfaces are a pale dirty grey colour, the upper half bearing a slight greenish tinge due to algae. Four major cracks are evident, with others connecting the various fragments. The surfaces all over are smooth, including the underside of the base and the interior of the basin.

Viewing the piscina from the front, a central plain panel is seen. This panel is bounded on either side by moulding that highlights the rounded nature of the front edges. This moulding is hourglass in shape. The rim on the front edge forms bulbous protrusions that overhang the corner mouldings rather in the manner of lugs. Closer inspection of the right moulding reveals the carving of a female bust incorporated into it; the eyes face outline and hair being the most obvious features. The remaining features are

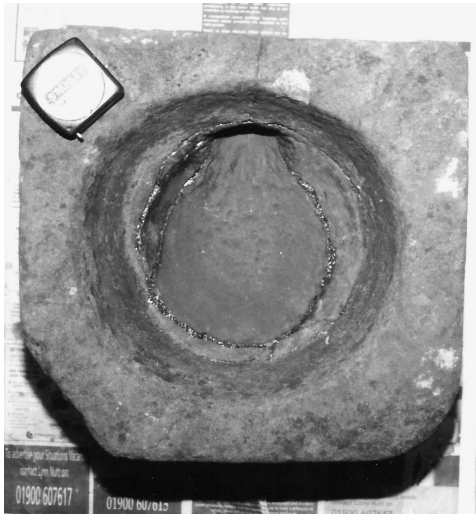


FIG. 2. Whitehaven. Piscina viewed from above.



FIG. 3. Whitehaven. Piscina. Rear drain hole & wear on rim.



FIG. 4. Whitehaven. Piscina during consolidation.

weathered and difficult to make out, although the upper torso and arms along with clasped hands are hinted at. The left moulding is badly damaged making the original form impossible to make out. The right elevation is plain. However, incised into the lower central area of this side is a series of faint hatched lines making up a lattice type decoration with a lozenge clearly visible at the bottom. The left side likewise is plain, except that is for a Gothic style upper case W made up of two overlapping Vs 3.5cms high x 5cms wide overall. Next to this is a feint diagonal / line that presumably formed part of a second letter, whilst just above this is what appears to be a small cross. Like the right elevation, these marks are incised into the stone.

Conclusion

Being of pre-Reformation date, this tells us that the piscina was never used for its original purpose within the present church on this site. When looking around for a possible origin for the piece, the likely candidate is the former chapel that stood in the middle of Lowther Street. Whilst it is believed that this chapel was built in the first half of the seventeenth century (the later Chapel Street taking its name from it), there is a hint that an earlier building stood on the site (M. Cinnamon, 1993). Cinnamon goes on to cite, along with other authors, the account of a chaplain named Richard of Whitehaven, mentioned in a charter of 1359. Whilst the charter does not state Richard as being actually chaplain of a church in Whitehaven, it must remain a strong possibility. Such a chapel would have come under the control of the priory church in St. Bees (D. Hay, 1966), serving the population that lived and worked around the anchorage in the bay. The said chapel was demolished in 1693 to make way for the completion of Lowther Street, its stone being reused in the construction of a new school further up Lowther Street towards The Flatt. Any particularly interesting stone, especially such as the one in question, could well have been relocated to the new church site for reuse in some way. This rather weather-beaten stone may well be the only physical link to a lost part of Whitehaven's medieval past.

C. R. Bowd, 8 Cherry Tree Crescent, Kendal LA9 5EN

P.S.

At the time of drafting this report (October 2003) the piscina was housed in the history and heritage area within the tower. A report of its finding along with relevant information was lodged with the then SMR located in Kendal in November 2003. Ref: 40290. Thanks must go to Joe Bragg (church treasurer) and the volunteers for all their help and cooperation.

Bibliography

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