

FONTS IN SUSSEX CHURCHES.

By J. LEWIS ANDRÉ, F.S.A.

AMONG the fittings which have been preserved in our ancient parish churches there is not one which can vie in interest with the font, and the presence of one of these vessels often appeals to the sympathies of the antiquary, the artist, or the Christian—the first by its antiquity, the second by its varied form and ornamentation, and the third by the remembrance of the countless generations who have been brought to it for the rite of baptism. There is a feature peculiar to the history of the font, namely, that whilst a church may have been entirely rebuilt, so as to obliterate all former features, the font has been almost invariably retained, a fact which renders it probable that many of the so-called Norman fonts, especially those of a plain character, may boast of an earlier origin and be the work of our Anglo-Saxon forefathers. Many also of the fonts discarded at the Cromwellian period have been subsequently rescued from profanation, replaced, and restored to their original use.

Probably no article in the varied list of “Instrumenta Ecclesiastica” has proved a fitter subject for architectural design and ornament than the font. In form also it has assumed every shape consistent with its purpose—round, square, octagonal, or many-sided—it has offered ample scope for the designer in Christian art, and although in Sussex we have none of those quaintly carved Norman fonts which are met with elsewhere, we have many which possess much interest by their varied outlines, and, if in later Gothic work our examples cannot compare in richness with those in East Anglia, we have some curious Perpendicular fonts of a local type, and there are one or two curious post-Reformational specimens.

Of sculptured work examples are of extreme rarity on Sussex fonts, the only one showing groups, or even single figures, being at Brighton. Foliage work occurs at Bury, Etchingam and Mountfield; animals at Salehurst and Slaugham; at Denton and Lewes the fonts have elaborate basket-work ornamentation, whilst Yapton has crosses, and the emblems of the Passion are seen at St. Clement's, Hastings. Heraldry appears on fonts at Burwash and Mountfield.

Although the great majority of the Norman fonts to be found in Sussex have square bowls, a few words will first be said on those of circular outline, and for this reason, namely, that in all probability the round form is the most ancient of the two and was no doubt selected from its being the nearest approach possible to that of a well or fountain, so as to symbolise that from the font flowed the waters of life given in baptism and suggested by the texts in Rev. vii. 17—"The Lamb . . . shall lead them unto living fountains of waters," and that in xxi. 6, "I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of life freely." A confirmation of the above theory is furnished by an example to be met with in the cloisters of St. John Lateran, Rome, where there is a circular fountain of sixth century date which is exact in its resemblance to a tub-shaped Norman font, being ornamented with bands of circles separated by a fillet of interlacing work, with crosses under round-headed arches, such as may be noticed on the tub-shaped Norman font at Yapton.

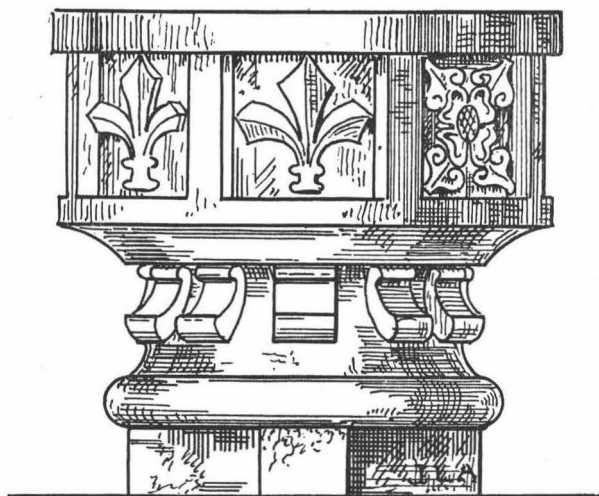
The circular fonts of early date may be divided into two classes, the tub-shaped or tumbler, and the cup-shaped. Of these the first-named may be the oldest in some cases and we have examples at Bignor, Brighton, Burton, Denton, North Mundham, Selham, West Wittering, Yapton and formerly at East Wittering. Of the above the font at Brighton demands a special notice, as it is without doubt the finest we possess in Sussex and, as before stated, the only one in which figure sculpture is introduced. It has been so fully described in our "Collections" that little that is new can be said about it.

The subjects comprise the Baptism of Our Lord, the Last Supper and some of the miracles of St. Nicholas of Myra.

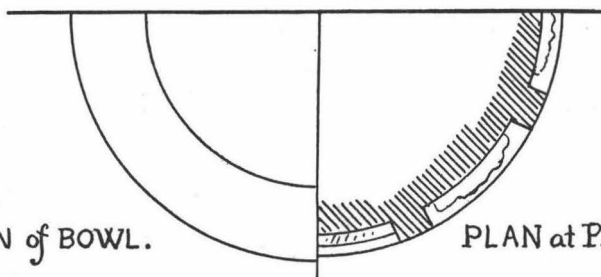
As regards the first scene it may be noticed that Christian iconography was so imperfectly known in the eighteenth century that Gosse and Astle in their "Antiquarian Repertory" (Vol. III., p. 185) say of this sculpture that the whole represents perhaps "the baptism of some great men newly converted to Christianity." The treatment of our Saviour's baptism here given agrees with that of the same event in the "Benedictional of St. Æthelwold," a work of tenth century date, and in both the waters of the river Jordan are seen risen to the waist of our Lord, in accordance with an old legend founded on some passages in the Old Testament, one from Exodus xv. 8, "The floods stood upright as an heap," and another from Joshua iii. 16, "The waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap;" also one from Psalm xxxiii. 7, "He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap." Many more recent works show this miraculous rising of the waters, as on the fifteenth century font at Stalham, Norfolk. On the Brighton example and in the "Benedictional" an angel holding our Lord's vesture is seen to the right hand of the Redeemer, an incident introduced in similar representations of later date, as in the one at Stalham. Of earlier date it appears on a panel of the eleventh century, forming part of the door of St. Paul's, outside the walls, at Rome; also on the Norman font at Porchester, Hants.

The Lord's Supper is a subject rarely met with on baptismal vessels, but is found on the font at North Grimstone, Yorkshire; also a twelfth century example. The elaborate draping of the table cloth as here seen was a frequent feature and occurred on a fifteenth century painting on a north wall at Horsham Church.

The fonts at Denton and at St. Anne's, Lewes, are beautifully carved and are almost identical in shape and details. They have often been engraved, and appear in the thirteenth volume of our "Collections." At West

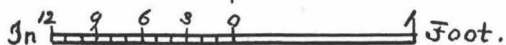


ELEVATION .



PLAN of BOWL.

PLAN at PANELS.



SCALE .

MOUNTFIELD.

Thorney the font has incised arcading and chevron patterns,¹ and at Yapton it has long crosses under round arches. Circular bowls of cylindrical outline exist at Cuckfield, Cold Waltham, (?) Coombes, Fernhurst, Mountfield and North Mundham. Of these circular bowls the most noticeable is the one at Mountfield; it is of large size, and although at first sight it appears to be a late fifteenth century work, it is in reality a Norman one. There are on its panels in plain square frames filled in with coarse foliage, fleurs-de-lis and armorial bearings, and the font resembles in shape and size that at North Mundham, and it is a good example of the custom of the later mediæval period, of altering plain Norman fonts to suit the taste of that epoch. The alterations sometimes, as here, took the form of covering perfectly plain early font bowls with carved ornamentation, and of which examples occur at Banwell, Somerset, and Fryerning, Essex. At other times the square bowls of Norman date were converted into octagonal ones, of which instances can be cited at Ingoldesthorpe and Warham, All Saints, Norfolk, and Chelvey, Somerset. The font at North Mundham is a strikingly dignified one, consisting of a circular bowl, measuring three feet three inches in diameter, with a depth of one foot eleven inches, and quite devoid of ornament, with the exception of a slight ovolo moulding.

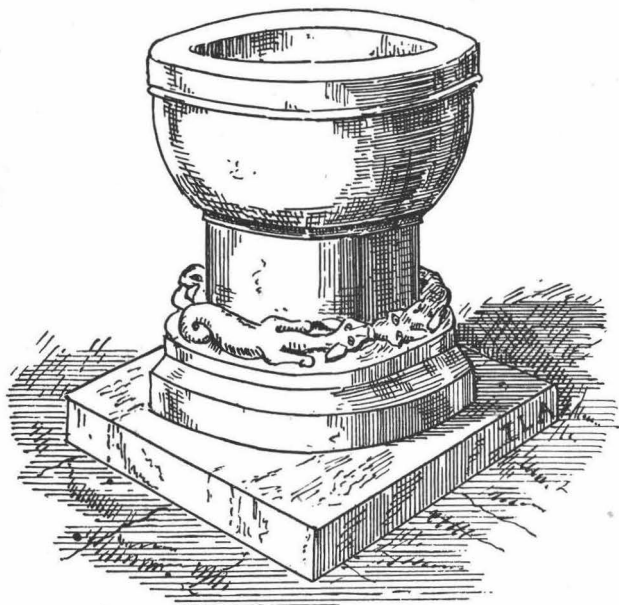
At Berwick the font is a plain circular mass, resembling the base of a pillar, and one at Bepton is equally unadorned.

Of cup-shaped Norman fonts we have examples at Cocking, Hurstpierpoint, Lodsworth, Salehurst, Sompting, Tortington and Woolbeeding. There was also one at Walberton, now superseded by a modern font. In the above list the Hurstpierpoint example deserves a passing notice, as the perfectly plain bowl has been recently enriched with paintings, in sober colouring, of scenes connected with baptism. This is quite in keeping with

¹ This tub-shaped font is engraved in the thirty-second volume of the "S.A.C.," p. 11; but I am informed that the print gives a very poor idea of its beauty, as the ornamentation partakes more of carved than incised work.

mediaeval practice, and many fonts were decorated with colour and gilding, as at Acle, Broke, and Gresham, Norfolk. Armorial bearings were probably always so treated.

Salehurst is remarkable for the enrichment of the base of the font stem with a cordon formed of images of that imaginary beast the salamander, a reptile which is met with also on the font in Winchester Cathedral, also of Norman workmanship. Swan, a seventeenth century



SALEHURST.

writer, says of this mysterious creature that it "is a small venomous beast—and for his constitution so cold that (like ice), if he do but touch the fire he puts it out. They be common in India, in the Isle of Madagascar, as Mr. Purchas alledgeth."² Chambers, in his "Dictionary," published in 1752, tells us that Salamander's Blood is a term which chemists give to the red vapours which, in

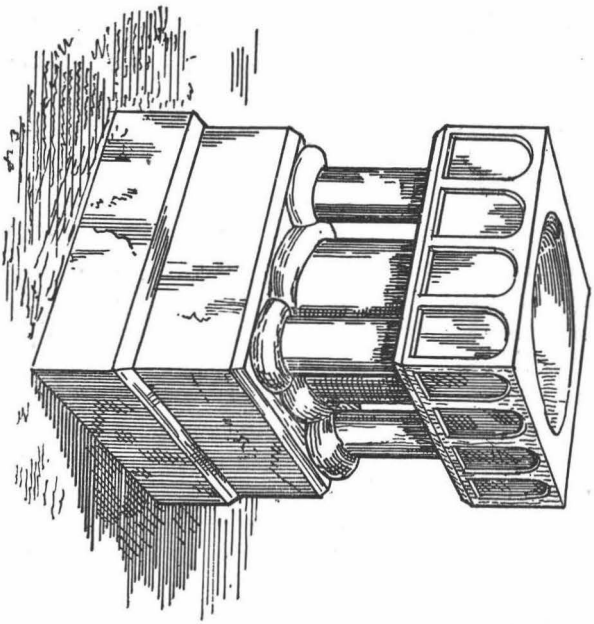
² "Speculum Mundi," p. 487.

distilling spirit of nitre, rise towards the latter end and "fill the receiver with red clouds." Formerly asbestos was supposed to be the wool of this creature and was called *linum vivum*; also that a cloth was made from it, but this, however, Marco Polo found out was manufactured from a fibrous mineral. The presence of this chimera on a font was probably to suggest that as the salamander quenched natural fire, so the waters of baptism put out the flames of concupiscence.

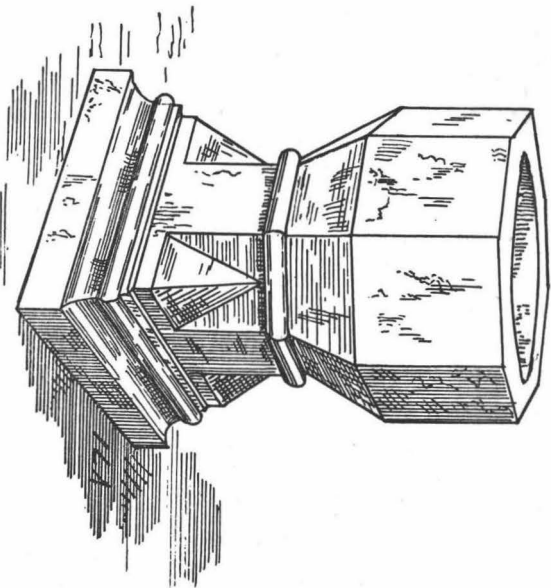
A very pretty example of a cup-shaped bowl exists at Tortington. It is surrounded by arches carried alternately by a foliated bracket and a pillar, and a similar range of arches occurs on the round font at Winterbourne Stapleton, Dorsetshire. Lodsworth and Woolbeeding have examples whose outlines resemble those of ale glasses.

As before observed, by far the largest number of Norman fonts in Sussex have square bowls and the choice of this shape was no doubt suggested by symbolical reasons, this figure being considered in Saxon and Norman times the emblem of perfection in geometry, an idea founded on Rev. xxi. 16, which speaks of the heavenly Jerusalem as being a "four square" city, besides which other passages of Scripture were cited to the same effect and consequently the square enters largely into the designs of Norman buildings, as is conspicuously the case in the church at Steyning.

Square font bowls occur at Aldingbourne, Amberley, Appledram, Barnham, Battle, Bishopstone, Burpham, Coates, Easebourne, Felpham, Ford, West Grinstead, West Hoathly, Ifield, Lancing, Lyminster, Midhurst, Paghham, Piddinghoe, Pulborough, Rodmell, New Shoreham, Old Shoreham, Sidlesham, Slaugham, Warnham, Wiggonholt, Wisborough Green and Worth. A large number of these quadrangular bowls are of local marble and are ornamented with slightly sunk arcades, as at Aldingbourne, Battle and Coates; whilst Lancing has simply square panels on each face, and the ornamentation of the font at Sidlesham is too indistinct to allow of the elucidation of its meaning.



COATES.



RUSTINGTON.

Slaugham has arcaded work, but on one side, instead of this, is an incised figure of a fish, the well-known emblem of Our Lord, and also of Christians in general. It is of great antiquity and is frequently met with in the Catacombs, and bears allusion to the call of the Apostles and to the miraculous draught of fishes described in the Gospel.

The basins formed by the bowls of fonts are in general of circular form; but in North Somerset, where there is a large number of small four-sided Norman bowls, the basins are also square in shape, as at Locking, Portbury and Portishead.

Many quadrangular bowls are supported by a central and four angle shafts, all circular, and the central one larger than the rest. This arrangement has been supposed by some to symbolise Christ and the four Evangelists. Examples are very numerous, and there are good ones at Battle, Coates and Warnham. Pulborough originally had five pillars, and Ifield has the outer columns provided with slightly carved capitals, but in general they are quite plain cylinders, or with very simple caps and bases. In some cases the inner shaft is of sandstone, the outer ones of marble, as at Ashurst.

Two Norman fonts of lead remain in Sussex—at Edburton and Piecombe—and will be found described in our twenty-second volume of "Collections."

Many fonts are so unadorned in character that they possess no feature by which their age may be determined, and thus Norman vessels may be mistaken for Jacobean ones and *vice versâ*. In such cases the only test as to age exists in the appearance in many Norman examples of traces of the iron staples by which their lids or covers were fastened down, as at Burton for instance.

The Norman font at Worth is supposed to be formed of two bowls, the upper one being placed on a reversed one of more ancient date; this may be the case, and there is a parallel example at Cornelly, Cornwall, where one basin is of thirteenth century date and the other of the fifteenth. These instances indicate how strong was the desire in mediæval days to preserve an original font.

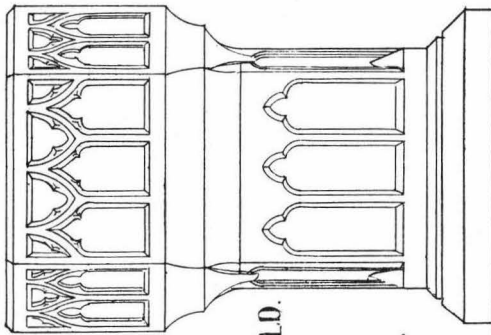
At Ashurst and Buxted are two very similar fonts of thirteenth century date. Both have pointed arches round square bowls, and central and angle shafts, but the Buxted example has a continuous arcade, the angles of the bowl being rounded off for that purpose. Ferring and Iford possess excellent Early English specimens with circular bowls on five shafts, and at Heyshott the caps of the angle pillars form part of the bowl, being worked out of a single stone, which is also the case with regard to the circular bowl at Cuckfield, but the pillars seem to be a restoration. At Maresfield the font formerly in the free chapel was probably of the same style, being described as circular, and that "the under part shows that when in use it was supported by six pillars forming a part of a central shaft."³

The font at Oving seems to be a 1st P. one, having a round bowl and plain pillars, and at Sutton there is one of octagonal form, with sunk arches, and carried by no less than eight shafts. The eight-sided form is unusual until the fifteenth century, when in many parts it became almost universally the shape of font bowls, as in East Anglia for example.

Of the 2nd P., or Decorated style, there is a good example at Etchingham and of which an engraving will be found accompanying a description of the beautiful church in our ninth volume, p. 351. As at Sutton, it has an octagonal bowl carried on eight shafts, which have elegantly carved foliage capitals. At Lindfield there is a curious font with an irregularly shaped bowl on a square chamfered shaft, both being panelled; whilst at Poynings is one of tub-shaped form with eight panelled faces, and the leaden example at Parham is of this period, with a circular bowl.

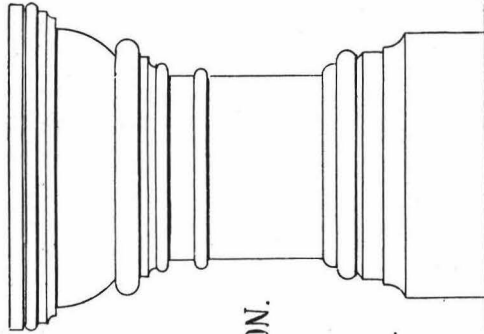
Sussex has many 3rd P., or Perpendicular fonts, though they are mostly very plain in character, and, as before stated, of fifteenth century fonts the majority of them are octagonal in outline, though other forms are met with, some being round, others square. The eight-sided

³ "S.A.C.," Vol. IX., p. 43.



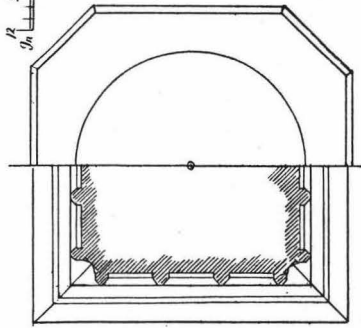
FONT AT
LINDFIELD.

Elevation.

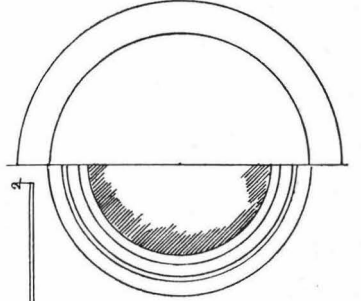


FONT AT
WARBLETON.

Elevation.



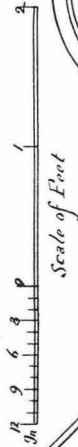
Half Plan
of Stem.



Half Plan
of Bowl.

Half Plan
of Bowl.

J Lewis André
Del.



Scale of Foot

examples may be divided into two classes, those which have panelled sides and those having perfectly plain ones. Of the former instances occur at Burpham, Bury, Clymping, Cowfold, West Dean (Chichester), Fittleworth, Hartfield, Hastings All Saints, Hastings St. Clement, Horsham, Patching, Portslade, Rogate, Rotherfield, Shermanbury, Sullington, Thakeham and Westham. As a rule these octagonal fonts are much higher than earlier ones.

The font at Cowfold has some peculiar ornamental panelling, similar to that on those at Shermanbury and Thakeham, and suggesting that all three are of the same or nearly the same date, 1481-2, a fact shown by the following extracts from the churchwarden's accounts of Cowfold for that year: "Solveve, for the maseyn for makyng of the fonte v^s for cariage of stone viii^d for lym iv^d and for feching i^d." "It for helpeng of mortar and other stuf ii^d."

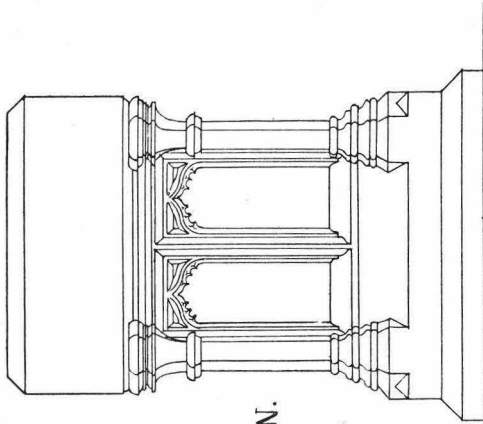
The font at Clymping is an elegant example of a panelled font and forms Plate XXVIII. in the second volume of Brandon's "Analysis of Gothic Architecture." Sometimes the bowl, stem and base are all panelled, as at Thakeham.

Perfectly plain-sided bowls of this period exist at Eastergate, Horsted Keynes, Singleton and Tillington, and at Henfield the octagonal bowl has the sides curiously chamfered so as to combine effectually with a central and four supporting shafts.

In 3rd P. work the faces of pillars and of fonts are sometimes curved inwards in late examples, or, to use an heraldic term, they are "invected." An instance is furnished of this at Burwash, where the curved faces of the font bowl bear shields charged with the famous badge—the Pelham buckle.

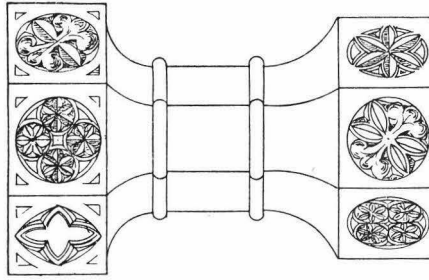
At Trotton the font takes a circular form and is perhaps of early fifteenth century work. Similar examples, undoubtedly of that date, occur at Wadhurst and Warbleton.

A peculiar and local form of font is met with in the eastern division of Sussex, and of which there are



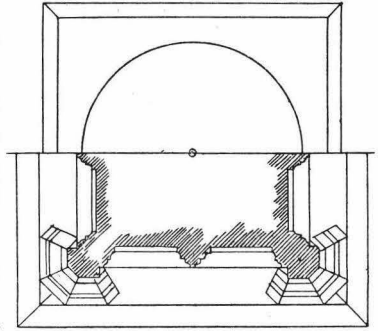
FONT AT
WILLINGTON.

Elevation.

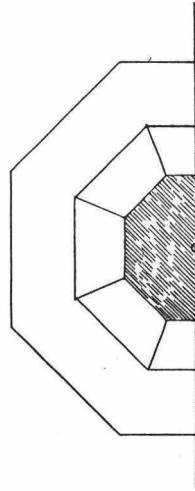


FONT AT
COWFOLD.

Elevation.



Half Plan
of Base.



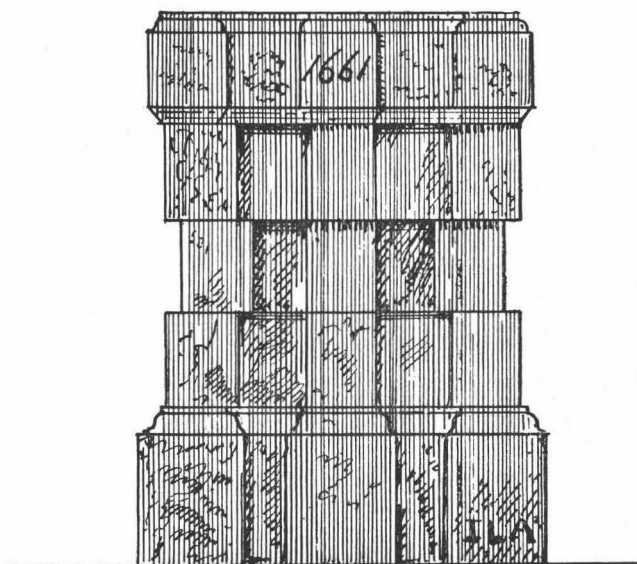
Half Plan of Base.



J Lewis Amold Del

instances, more or less alike, at Alfriston, Barcombe, Beddingham, West Dean, Eastbourne, Hurstmonceux, Jevington, Southease, and Willingdon. A glance at the drawing here given of the last named will give a better idea of the characteristics of this kind of font than can be conveyed by the pen. It is a purely local type and the Willingdon example is an elegant one.

Of sixteenth century fonts, I know of no examples in Sussex, but of the succeeding period there are a few which mostly date after the Restoration, and replacing those which had been destroyed during the interregnum, when the destruction or the banishment of fonts from churches must have been lamentably common, as in 1846 there were three ancient ones in the garden of the Shakespeare Arms Inn, at Stratford-upon-Avon. When not destroyed some fonts appear to have been re-introduced at the churches from which they had been expelled, which probably accounts for the present weather-beaten



LURGASHALL.

appearance of those at Appledram and Sidlesham. There are curious fountains of the period at Lurgashall and North-chapel; both are of local marble and of the same original and unusual design, and the former bears date 1661. At Mayfield there is an example dated 1666, and which supplies us with an instance of that love of our Gothic style of architecture, which appears never to have been quite extinct in England, for in this fountain an attempt to reproduce a mediæval one is clearly evident. Ashburnham possesses a seventeenth century fountain, and at Warminghurst is one of very small size, probably dating early in the eighteenth, and at Glynde it is on record that at the rebuilding of the church in 1763 a marble fountain was provided at a cost of £20. 4s. 0d.

In modern times many fountains have been shifted from their original positions, as at Horsham, where this vessel is placed at the south side of the tower; whilst in 1854 the fountain at Lancing stood under the canopy of the founder's tomb in the north wall of the chancel. Anciently the fountain always occupied a conspicuous position, and in large churches frequently stood in the central passage down the nave, whilst in order that processions should pass freely round it the benches on either side were shortened, as may be seen at the Norfolk Churches of Calthorpe and Sherringham.

The platforms on which the fountains stood appear to have been formed of one or two perfectly plain steps, as at Etchingham and Salehurst, and the plinth thus made was quadrangular. Many fountains have no steps whatever, but it is not unlikely that in many cases they perished when the fountains were discarded at the Cromwellian period and not replaced.

In East Anglia great dignity is given to the fountain by placing it on several steps, which in many cases are enriched with panel work, and sometimes bear inscriptions recording the donors, as at Acle, Norfolk, and Orford, Suffolk.

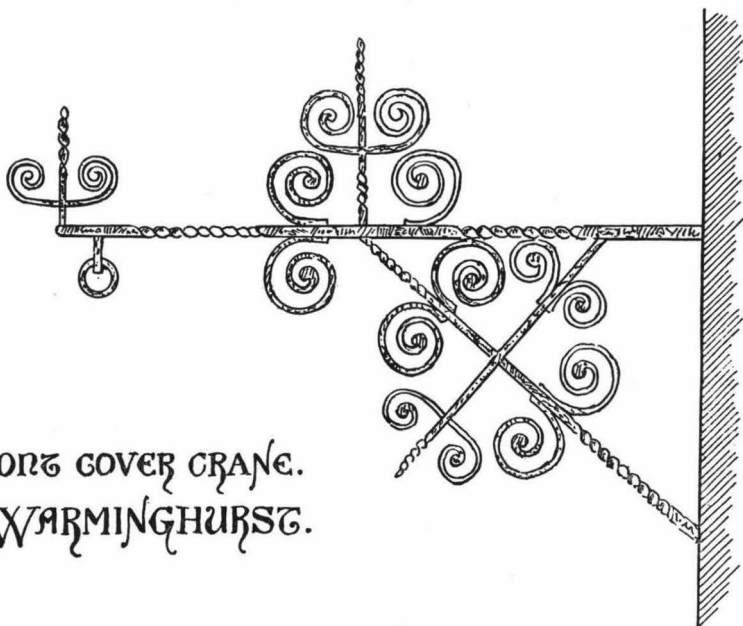
In 1287 Bishop Quivel of Exeter required that in each parish church of his diocese there should be "Baptisterium lapideum bene seratum," or a stone fountain securely

locked, and in like manner in 1305 Archbishop Winchelsey ordered "fontem cum serura," a font with a lock. The staples for these locks still remain in some cases, as at Stopham, and fastened down a flat lid. Canopied covers do not appear to have been introduced until the fifteenth century, of which period many fine examples still exist, the noblest being probably the one at Ewelme, in Oxfordshire. In Sussex there was at Patching in 1854 a very pretty canopy, now, alas! destroyed. It was eight-sided, with moulded angle ribs curving inwards and ending in a richly foliated finial. Later in date is a somewhat similar cover at Battle, but of ogee shape with crockets to the angle ribs, and at Sompting there was, in the middle of the last century, a good plain pyramidal one. Each of these examples was movable.

At Ticehurst is a magnificent font canopy with eight upright sides, each of which is elaborately panelled with Flamboyant tracery within and without. It is of fifteenth century date and stands permanently on the font, four of the sides being hung on hinges, so as to open when the rite of baptism takes place. These permanent covers are rare in England, but there are two in Norfolk, one being at Terrington St. Clement, and the other at Knapton, the latter dated as late as 1704. Rotherfield now possesses a rich canopy, composed of old and new work, and is ornamented with the numerous armorial bearings of the house of Neville, having been given by Henry, Earl of Abergavenny, in 1816. West Grinstead and Nuthurst appear to retain portions of original eighteenth century covers.

At Warminghurst there is a very small late seventeenth century font, now without a cover, but a quaint crane of ironwork for the suspension of a canopy still remains.

During the first half of the nineteenth century a Wedgwood porcelain basin was often placed within the font, or in other cases formed the sole baptismal vessel. In 1854 one of these stood inside the font bowl at Wadhurst, but of late years these articles have entirely disappeared. They were made especially for baptisms and had three little panels charged respectively with the



FONT COVER CRANE.
WARMINGHURST.

emblems of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity—a hand, a cross and a dove.

At the present day there is a praiseworthy custom of commemorating a departed friend or relative by the presentation to a church of a stained glass window, or some article of ecclesiastical furniture, a new font being a favourite gift. Unfortunately, to carry out this benevolent design, many excellent but plain fonts have been discarded to give place to new ones, the original vessels in some instances being sent elsewhere, as was the case with the font at Chichester Cathedral, now in a church at Worthing, whilst the one at West Tarring now adorns the cathedral at Melbourne. At Westbourne in 1863 the old font bowl was “decently buried in the churchyard” (“S.A.C.,” Vol. XXII., p. 85).

In conclusion, it may be observed that sometimes modern fonts are of remarkable character. Thus at Rayleigh, Essex, there is one large enough for a pulpit, whilst at Somerleyton, Suffolk, another is so delicately carved that to preserve it from injury it is enclosed in a wirework structure, exactly like a gigantic poll-parrot’s cage.