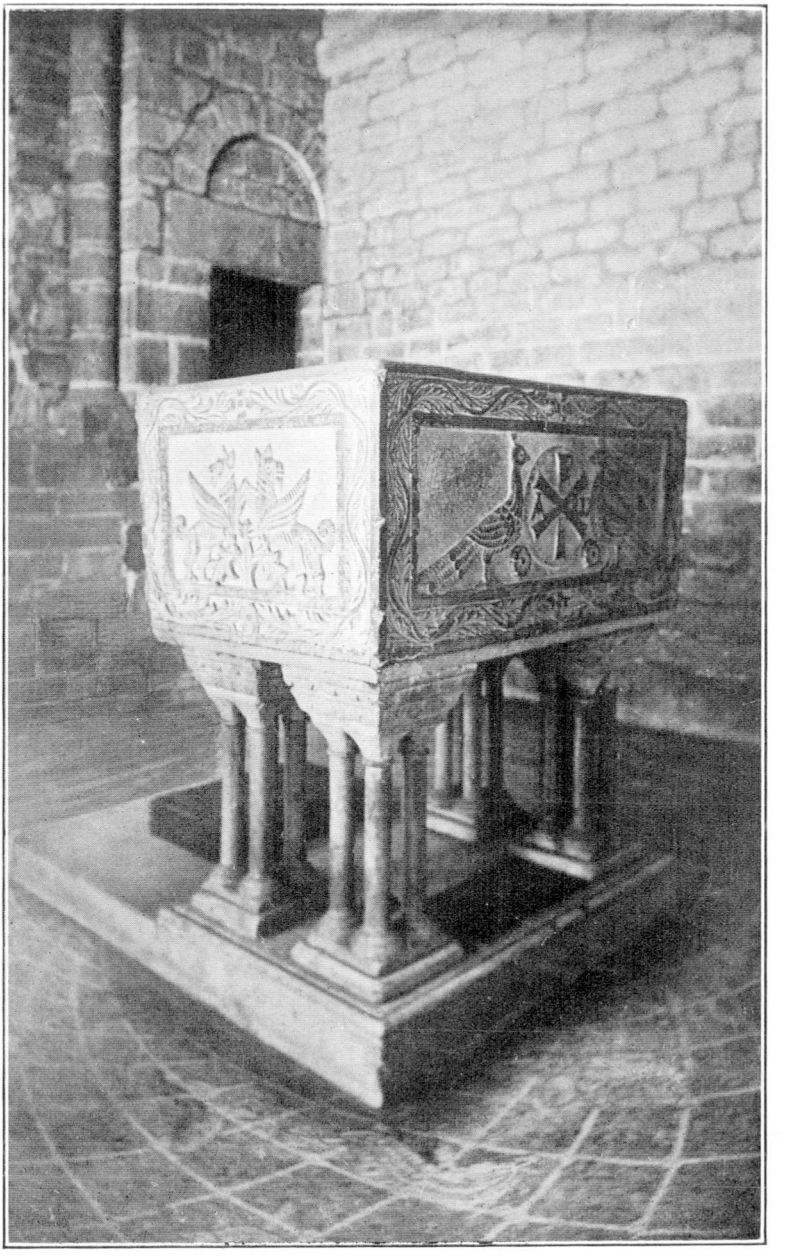


Chester Cathedral—The Font

D. B. Jones, Photo.

The Baptistery of the Cathedral

BY THE VEN. E. BARBER, M.A., F.S.A.,
ARCHDEACON OF CHESTER

(Read 17th February, 1910)

THE ordinary visitor to the Cathedral would imagine that the part we are to consider this afternoon is fulfilling its original purpose, and used in the way in which it was intended to be used from the very first. Yet there is, perhaps, hardly any portion of the building which has a more chequered history than this.

The architecture tells us unmistakably that it was part of S. Anselm's original design, and we can conceive that he may have contemplated two western towers, and that we see here the base or lower story of one, all trace of its southern sister having vanished, if it ever existed. I think, however, we shall be justified in coming to the conclusion that this Tower here was never completed, or carried up much higher than the height which is shown from the inside.

The reasons for such an opinion are the following: there is no trace externally of such erection, which would probably have been left. On the north side of this base of the Tower lie remains of the old Monastery, which go back to its Norman foundation, and so to Anselm's time, or the days immediately succeeding

him. As you know, we have that interesting vaulted building at the west side of the Cloisters, and between it and the outer wall of the Church a passage of a date very little later; both, however, being distinctly Norman in character. Moreover, over that passage will be found a Chapel, also dating back to Norman times, though at a later period the old groining was overlaid with plaster panelling. Still, the Chapel, if not part of Anselm's plan or scheme, must have been built very shortly after he laid before Hugh Lupus his idea of the Monastery which he was anxious to construct.

The window, which now gives light into the Baptistery was, for a short period, an external window in the unfinished Tower, though a window on the north side and in that stage of the Tower would be unusual; still, it apparently was put there. Later, but still in Norman times, the groined passage with the groined Chapel above and with a chamber over it was erected, and architectural experts will find some interesting problems to discuss and solve in the work which those builders left behind.

A little to the north of that window is the trace of a Norman window, or possibly a door, which communicated with a staircase leading into the Church. This is now covered by the later perpendicular shafting which was to carry the groining. Of course, such Chapel might have been built abutting on the *completed* Norman Tower; but I am still of the opinion that it was not carried up. If no external traces were left we should probably see signs of it inside the building; but you will notice high up on the south wall at the west, and beyond Simon Ripley's Clerestory, a

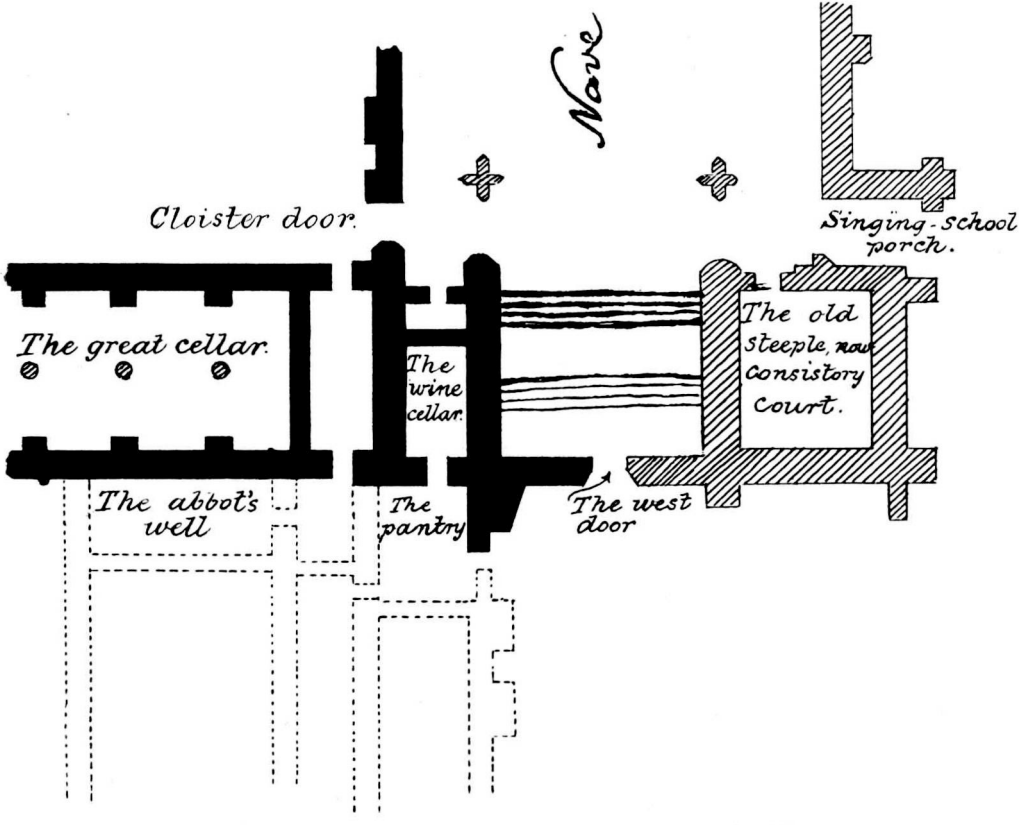
piece of work of later date than Norman times, as if the early builders had not reached that height and so built the Tower.

At a later period, as we shall see, a chamber was constructed; this was probably an after-thought, as the forming of such chamber would involve the filling in of the arches at the bottom of the Tower on the south and east sides. This would leave a chamber underneath on the floor-level of the Church, and traces of a doorway leading into this are to be seen in the wall at the west end, and these are more marked on the outside. As a matter of fact we know that the masonry filling up these arches was only pulled down in 1885, and I only regret that I have not as yet been able to meet with a photograph or print which will give us today a clear and correct impression of what it was like, or an indication of the time when it was erected. This remark applies specially to the south side. It will be seen here that the work is of an earlier date than that of Simon Ripley, as the walling immediately around and above the Arch is different in character from his, and much more rude. This shows that in the reconstruction of the Nave with its arcading this lower part was not interfered with, and the old building was left standing as well as the north wall of the Church. The upper portion, however, was probably raised at that time as the Perpendicular Clerestory on this north side extends over some of the earlier Norman work, and affords, I think, another proof that the original Norman Tower was not carried up higher than the height already indicated, as it would have required to be removed before the western window of the Clerestory and the adjacent wall could be erected.

On the eastern side some work was done after the Dissolution of the Abbey, when a staircase was constructed by which the Bishop might enter the Cathedral from his residence without having to go out of doors. In removing that staircase portions of S. Werburgh's Shrine were discovered, which had been used in the building of it, and which have been again used in its reconstruction, and enabled Sir Arthur Blomfield to determine its original height and form. Whether these were found in the lower or upper part of the staircase I cannot say.

Amongst the *Harl. MSS.* in the British Museum, in the Randle Holme's collection, is a plan of the Monastery, taken from a survey made a short time after the Dissolution. A description of the plan is also given, which must belong to the 17th century. In the plan, which, of course, was of a considerably earlier date, the base of the Tower is represented as being unconnected with the Church, the only entrance to it being from the west end; whilst a thick line on the south and east indicates that walls existed then, separating it from the Church. On the east side there are indeed two walls, these forming a smaller chamber, which was apparently entered from the Church. This would occupy the position of the staircase just referred to, but there is nothing in the plan to show that it was then a staircase, nor is any allusion made to such in the description. The plan, no doubt, is not very perfect and complete, for the turret staircase at the north-west angle is not shown.

The plan is a ground-plan, and so generally only refers to the use of the buildings on the basement or ground-floor. In the description of the plan this part



Chester Cathedral—from old Plan, showing the Baptistery as the Wine-cellar

(Enlarged under the direction of Captain C. F. Barber)

of the Church is included in the *Abbot's House*, and the purpose ascribed to it that of "The wine cellar"; whilst the apartment beyond, on the west, is called "The pantry; over it the stone hall."

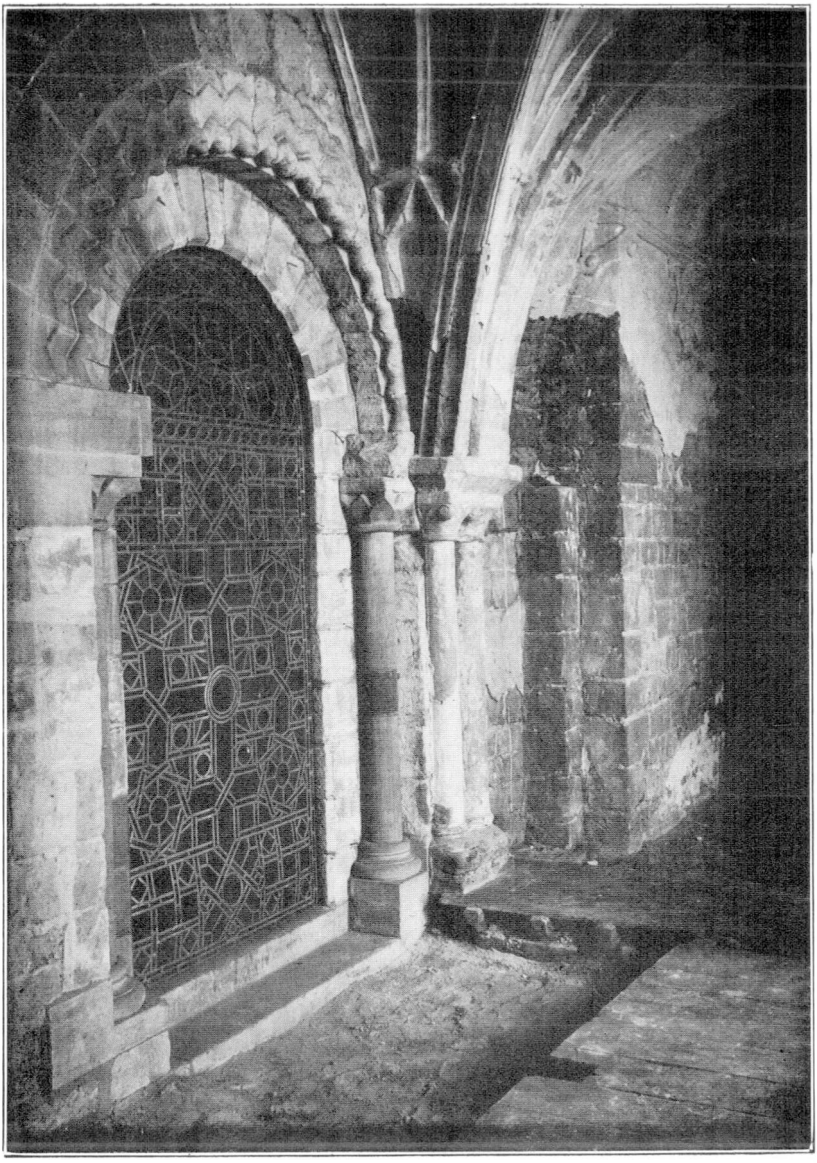
As you know, there are no Norman remains westward of the Church, so there is nothing left to show whether the Abbot's House originally extended in that direction. The building of the King's School has also removed old landmarks; but in what is now called "The Vaulted Chamber" we have preserved to us a part of the Abbot's dwelling at a later date, the work belonging to the 14th century; and this is marked in the description of the plan as "Strong beer cellar"; over it "Darby Chamber."

The buildings granted to the Bishop as a Palace at the time of the foundation of the See are also described in the Charter of Henry VIII. (dated at Walden August 6, 1541). The Charter is in Latin. The description begins from the north, with the First Hall or Entrance Hall and the adjacent domestic offices; then the Second Hall or Great Hall, which was over the Norman Chamber sometimes called the Crypt; then the Chapel, with the rooms over it commonly called "the Chappell Chamber"; then (and this refers to the part we are considering) "another Chamber lately *belonging to the Abbot* with two cupboards, and with a more secret chamber attached, and with other underground offices belonging to the chamber of the said Abbot."

In the Paper read by the late Mr. John Henry Parker, F.S.A., at the meeting of the Archæological Institute at Chester in 1857, this is described in a note as the "Chamber over the Wine-Cellar, and the stone hall

over the pantry or perhaps the Darby Chamber and cellar under it." At any rate, it gives clear indication that at the time of the Dissolution the Abbot's House or Lodgings included this portion of the Church, and that there was here an apartment, on the same level as the adjoining Chapel, with a cellar underneath it, the two being separated from the Church by the masonry which filled in the Arches. The apartment was doubtless lighted then, as it was afterwards when part of the Bishop's Palace, by a sky-light, as there was no outer wall in which a window could be placed. The cellar had a small three-light window on the south side into the Church, which some here may remember. That window was, I believe, not Norman in its character; it may have taken the place of an earlier one, if, as I have ventured to suggest, the Abbot's House, even in those early days, thus invaded the Church. The arrangement is very unusual.

Canon Fowler, of Durham, informs me that he knows of no other instance of any part of an Abbot's lodging being incorporated in the fabric of the Church. His idea was that it might have been a late arrangement made to meet the growing needs of the Abbot; but this is controverted by the theory, which I have already advanced, that the arrangement dates from Norman times. We are accustomed to find priests' chambers in connection with some of our old Churches, but these generally are in the "parvise" over a south porch. Such a one we have over the porch here; it is now known as the "muniment room," and contains old documents and books and papers. In the plan I have referred to it is styled "the singing school porch," the statement being added that "the room over the porch was used as a singing school," though



Chester Cathedral—Window in Baptistery

(Once used as doorway into Norman Chapel)

G. W. Haswell, Photo.

this, perhaps, was not the original purpose for which it was erected. We have also interior chambers in close proximity to Shrines in some Churches, and here it was customary to have a watcher always present to guard the relics and the gifts with which the Shrine was adorned; but here, apparently, part of the Abbot's House, used for domestic purposes, occupied a corner of the Church as originally planned; and this is proved conclusively by the Plan and the Charter which I have quoted.

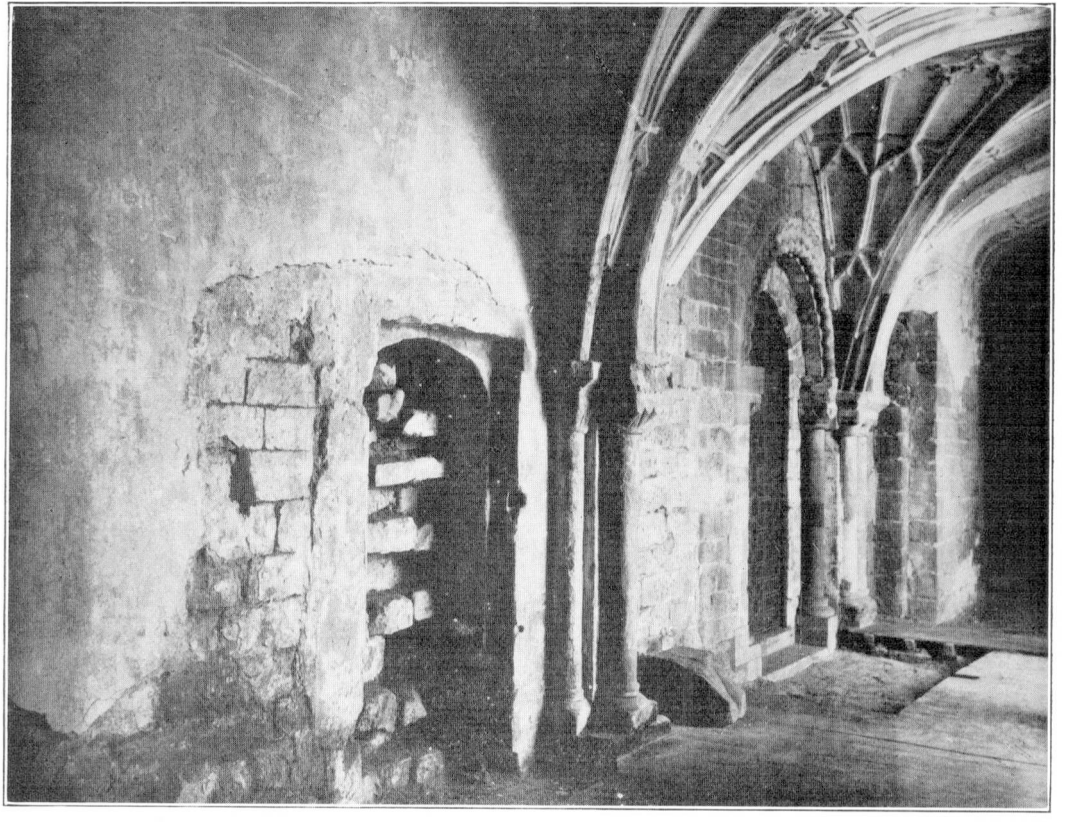
When the See was founded, and the Abbot's House granted to the Bishop for a residence, it would not, of course, appear unseemly for such use to be continued. Whether the Abbot, as well as the Bishop, had his *Wine-Cellar* here, it is not possible to say, as the description of the plan is of later date than the plan itself, whilst the words in Henry VIII.'s Charter do not indicate the use made of the underground offices here. There are some who will remember this place in Bishop Graham's time. The Dean tells me that the Bishop's study, which occupied the upper portion, was entered from the dining room by a door at the west, whilst entrance to the Norman (or private Chapel) was given through a door which was where the Norman window is. The Arch of the window had been removed, the door going up into the wall above, and a few steps led down into the Chapel, as the floor of the Bishop's study was not on the same level as the Chapel, but a little higher.

On the east was a door leading to the staircase, which brought him into the Cathedral without going into the outer air. The wooden ceiling which we see is about half way up the height of the room as it then

was; the room being lighted from the top by a domed skylight. It is generally said that the Bishop had some way of intimating, by a token placed at the head of the staircase, whether he intended to be present at service so that the Verger might come and conduct him to his Throne.

We now come to consider the present purpose to which this part of the Cathedral is devoted, a Baptistery. *Dean Howson*, in his "Hand-book to Chester Cathedral" of 1882, uses these words: "Here is one of the most valuable remnants of the old Norman Church. This space is destined for the Baptistery, which it is hoped may be completed at no very distant date"; adding later, "If the Norman bay at the western extremity is fully restored according to the plan which is contemplated, a great addition will be made to the beauty and interest of the Nave." The Dean just lived to see his wish accomplished under the direction of Sir Arthur Blomfield; for the Baptistery was dedicated by Bishop Stubbs on October 9th, 1885, and the Dean left Chester soon after, and was seized with a fatal illness, and did not return alive.

Before describing the work and the Font, it may be well to say that a Font, and so a Baptistery, would be an unusual thing to find in an Abbey. Canon Fowler and the Rev. D. H. S. Cranage both agree in this opinion. The former writes: "Neither do I know of, or suppose there was, a Font in any Abbey Church that made no provision for parishioners"; the latter: "I do not think that fonts are found in Abbey Churches, unless there were parochial rights. I should be surprised to find one in a Cistercian, Carthusian, or Pre-monstratensian Church, where there were no such rights."



Chester Cathedral—Interior of Norman Chapel
(showing doorway which probably led into staircase into the Church)

G. W. Haswell, Photo.

Of course, there would be a Font in S. Oswald's in the South Transept, and I am told that the *old* Font has recently been recovered, and placed in the Parish Church. Then it is *possible* that a Font was placed in the Cathedral after the foundation of the See. In this connection Mr. Cranage says: "I think that Cathedral Fonts are *generally*, if not always, of post-Reformation date." There is, however, a Norman Font in Winchester Cathedral, and also, I believe, one in the Cathedral at Hereford; and there may be many other instances of ancient Fonts in Cathedral Churches.

It is possible, as I said, that a Font was placed in the Cathedral, to meet the parochial needs of the Precincts, when the See was founded; and that such Font would be at the west end, near the entrance, and in close proximity to this spot.

In the engraving of the Cathedral dated 1813, Bishop Moreton's Font is seen on the south side, on the landing between the two flights of western steps. It was probably removed after this magnificent Font was brought and placed here in 1885, and placed temporarily in the South Transept, and then brought here again, though not to the exact spot it formerly occupied. But there was an earlier Font, though, as we gather, of a somewhat mean description. We may at least form this opinion from the inscription, which is in Latin, of which the following is a translation: "William Moreton as an infant found here a Font of brick: the same person when Bishop of Kildare erected it of marble, A.D. 1687."

The Font in which the Bishop had been baptised had very probably been demolished. We know, for

instance, that after the Siege of Chester the Parliamentarians did not respect very rigidly the Articles of Surrender which had been signed, and that the Cathedral and the Churches of the City suffered much, and that windows and monuments were destroyed, and Fonts defaced. We know also that in August 1683 the Cathedral was again wantonly damaged by a reckless mob, instigated by the ambitious Duke of Monmouth. In the *Cowper MSS.* is a description of this disgraceful outrage, from which we learn that after forcing the doors, bursting open the cupboards, and rending the surplices to rags, "*they beat to pieces the baptismal font.*" It was four years later that Bishop Moreton gave that marble Font. The Cathedral Registers only begin with that year 1687, so that we have no record in them of the baptism of William Moreton.

It was, as I have said, on October 9th, 1885, that this place was dedicated as the Baptistery by Bishop Stubbs, and I am indebted to the files of *The Chester Courant* for certain particulars of the ceremony and the work. With regard to the former, we may state that it took place in the afternoon service, and after the Second Lesson. The Dean gave a short addrese treating of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, and then requested the Bishop to dedicate the Baptistery, the Choir, Clergy, and Congregation proceeding to the place, and after the dedicatory prayers had been said by his Lordship returning to the Choir. At the conclusion of Evensong a sermon was preached by the Bishop of Colchester, the Right Rev. Alfred Blomfield, D.D., himself a son of a former Bishop of Chester. His text was Psalm lxv., 10, "The river of God is full of water." Amongst those present on

the occasion were the present Dean who had recently been appointed a Residentiary Canon, and the Rev. S. Cooper Scott.

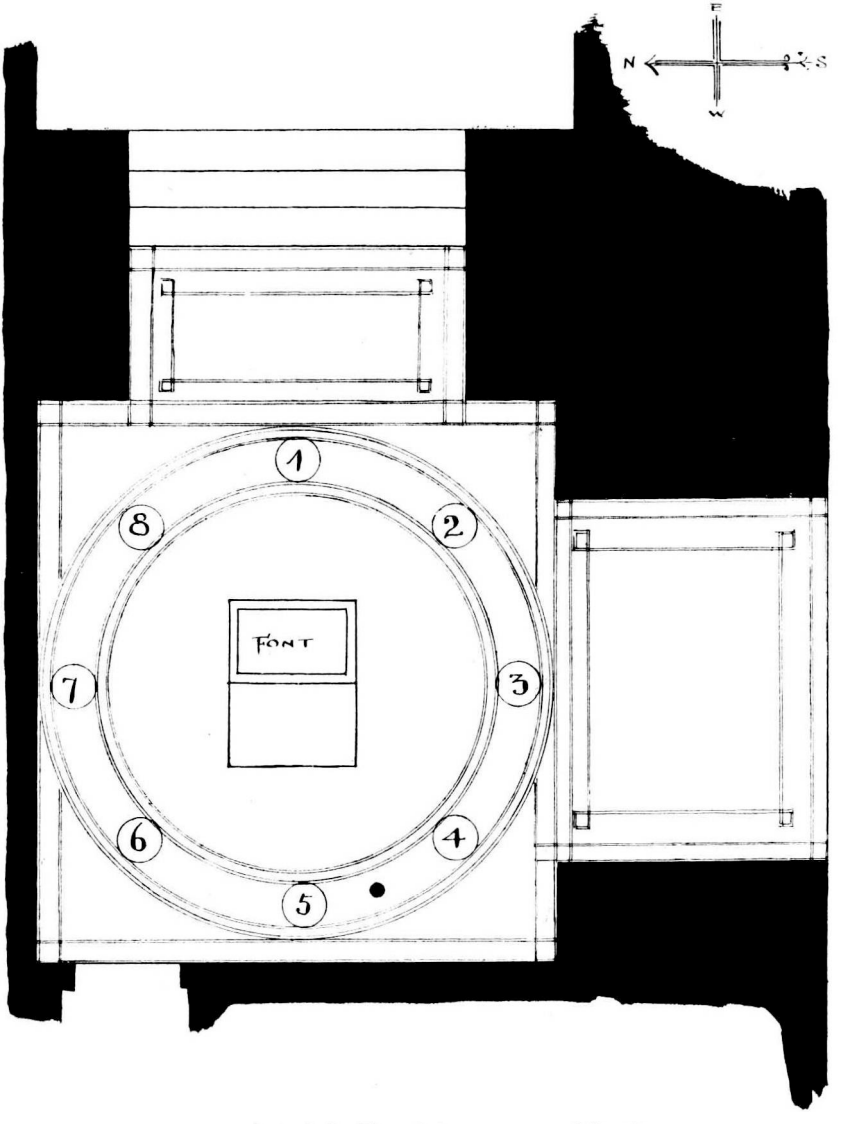
The account tells us that by the removal of the masonry on the left on entering the west door, a fine Norman Arch had been brought to light, as also a similar Arch in the North Aisle. It speaks of an ancient Norman Chamber, which formerly had been merely a dark hole, being thereby revealed. Even now it is apparent that certain stones, which had been cut away when the covering wall was erected, had to be replaced; but most of the supporting shafts were comparatively perfect, and required but little attention. On the west side some new masonry seems to have been put in at the bottom, thus hiding the lower portion of the doorway which once existed there. It is possible that some new work had to be put in here and there when the plastering was removed and the pointing done. The Baptistery is entered from the east by three marble steps, which in our climate have lost a good deal of their colour and freshness. The pavement is covered with marble mosaics, which were executed by the same firm (Messrs. Burke & Co., Newman Street, London) who did those on the wall in the North Aisle.

Having recently described those works of art, I need only repeat here that Italian workmen were employed, and that only marble, and no fictitious substance, is used in them. The design had been carefully thought out by the Dean, who had no doubt taken counsel with others in the matter. The mosaic, then, represents the 153 fishes of the Second Miraculous Draught, the fishes being entangled in the net; each fish being

marked with III. in Roman characters. No explanation of this is given, but I take it to refer to the Blessed Trinity, and so to the form of Christian Baptism, "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Surrounding the net is a circle with curving device representing the waves of the sea; and at intervals are eight medallions containing a Dove to represent the Holy Spirit, and seven heads symbolical of the seven Christian virtues: Wisdom, Faith, Patience, Counsel, Hope, Fortitude, and Charity. The angles are filled with mosaics, representing the stars in the heavens.

The Font is said to be "of mottled marble, and it stands on four sets of slender quadruple pillars. It is quaintly carved." The body of it is oblong, and on the front appears, in Greek Characters, the monogram for Christ, with the letters, Alpha and Omega, contained in a circle; and at either side "a Peacock, the emblem of the Resurrection. On the other side is some very rich tracery carving, with a simple cross on the border; and on the ends are represented pairs of flying beasts, which may, perhaps, be described as dragons." The Font stands on a large stone step, the western portion, where the minister takes his position, being a little lower than that on which the Font itself is placed.

In 1886, some nine months after it was brought here, the present Bishop of Bristol was staying with me, and he said that there could be little doubt that the Font had been brought from North Italy, and that there was one at Ravenna, where the carved tracery was almost exactly identical with this. He also advanced the theory that the origin of *some* of these old Fonts was that they had been used as fountain-troughs or well-heads — then Christians in



Chester Cathedral—Plan of the pavement of Baptistery

G. W. Haswell, del.

early days had baptized in them — and afterwards introduced them into their Churches, carving on them some Christian symbol. He gave as an instance of this use a well-head (which, of course, has no bottom) and which is preserved in the British Museum.

This particular Font has no doubt been taken from some Church in North Italy. It was purchased from some dealer in Antiques by the late Lord Egerton and presented to the Cathedral. I endeavoured to find out from him something of its previous history, but was not able to gain any definite information about it. We can, therefore, only state that there is little doubt that it came from the district I have mentioned. In confirmation of this opinion I may say that a little more than four years ago the Cathedral was visited by Dr. Monté, of Genoa, under the guidance of Professor Newstead. He not only critically examined the Font, but expressed his readiness to write a description of it on his return, if he had accurate measurements taken and also photographs of each of the sides. Though we have not the advantage of having such an interesting monograph, I am favoured with a few notes which were communicated by him to Professor Newstead at the time of his visit, and which have been placed in my hands. From these it appears that many other similar examples of Fonts are to be met with in North Italy, especially in the districts of Lombardy, Venice and Emilia, and southwards to the province of Ravenna. The character of the ornamentation or design, and the symbol of the bird, as also the monogram of Christus clearly indicate the period and also the country to which it belongs. The stone very probably comes from the Lombard country, and the Font may be dated as between the 4th and 7th cen-

turies. Dr. Monté evidently thought, from a line of which no explanation is given, that some connection might be traced between it (I suppose through its decoration) and the politics of the period. My impression is that Dr. Browne ascribed the Font to the 5th century. It is at any rate a very early one, and, whatever its previous history may have been, we can only be thankful that it has been restored to its sacred purpose, and is now one of the many treasures of this Cathedral.

The little window in the north wall, which lights into the Jacobean addition to the Norman Chapel, and which evidently dates from that period, was lighted with common glass. This has given place to some better glass with subjects on it, which are in harmony with the Sacrament of Holy Baptism as administered close by. In the wall near it will be seen the remains of a Norman Arch, which may have been a window into this Norman Aisle.

I hope I have not wearied you. My one regret is that, when I first visited Chester in 1863, and was for a few days the guest of Precentor Venables, I did not take more particular notice of many points in this venerable Cathedral, with which in after years I was, by God's providence, to be so intimately associated.

NOTE.

The following note, by the late Mr. E. W. Cox, on the Peacock as a Christian symbol will be of interest:

THE PEACOCK ON THE FONT OF CHESTER CATHEDRAL.

"The Peacock is used as a Christian symbol of the Resurrection. Its adoption is one of those curious

adaptations of heathen mythology so commonly found in early Christianity. Argus, the King who was set by Juno to watch Io, had, according to the pagan myth, a hundred eyes. He was slain by Mercury, who closed his, otherwise wakeful, eyes by playing on his lyre. Juno then set the eyes in the tail of the peacock, her attendant bird, and they were displayed open whenever it unfolded its tail. In the Christian paraphrase Mercury stands for death, and the reopening of the eyes, set in the peacock's tail, for the reawakening of the innumerable eyes of mankind at the Resurrection.

This symbol is most used in Italy. I think it is to be found carved in some of the curious Armenian Churches. Armenia followed the Roman, not the Greek rite. It is very rare in Britain, and it is generally needful to trace up local symbolism to its origin before allocating it too generally. At the time that Britain was occupied by Rome, the cult of the Greek gods had fallen much into abeyance, and the philosophies of the Alexandrian and Oriental Schools were much in fashion. Gnostic and Mithraic speculations were more in fashion with Rome, and British Christian symbolism was to some extent influenced by these, but quite as much by Celtic and Norse mythology. Consequently, we draw from different sources than the classical countries, and do not use all their symbols.

Use of the Peacock symbol on a font may be meant to indicate death to sin and new birth to righteousness."

I may add the following extract from a review of a book on Christian Art in a recent number of *The Church Times:*

"Amid the paintings of the Catacombs, peacocks are of frequent occurrence. The peacock is a type of the Resurrection, on account of the old legend that its flesh is incorruptible, and that it sheds its feathers in the winter only to assume a yet more brilliant plumage in the spring."

This gives another theory of the symbol.