

ST. MICHAEL'S, AYLSHAM, NORFOLK.



## FIGURE AND DESCRIPTION OF THE FONT

At Aylsham.

COMMUNICATED

BY THE REV. E. T. YATES.

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IN the Preface to the first volume of Original Papers published by the Society, the parish church of Aylsham is mentioned as worthy of notice, in connexion with the more beautiful structures (but of later date) of Cawston and Salle. It is not, however, to the church, but to the Font contained in it, that I would on the present occasion draw the attention of the members of our Society.

Fonts are always interesting, not more from the pleasing reminiscences which they suggest, than from their use in pointing out the dates of the several churches in which they are found. This is particularly the case with reference to the Font, a sketch of which accompanies this paper. True, it is not so in all instances, as may be seen by the circular Font at Heydon, and the very interesting, but little known, ones at Great Hautbois and Belaugh; but, generally speaking, they are of the same date as the churches in which they are placed. That at Aylsham is early perpendicular, octagonal, and bears upon its pedestal the arms of the renowned John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. This patron of Wickcliffe, whether from religious or political motives I will leave the student of history to decide, is generally supposed to



have built the church (Aylsham is within the Duchy of Lancaster); and it was probably as a memorial to posterity of his munificence, that we find his arms engraved either by himself or some other benefactor upon the Font. For, in addition to these arms, which occupy the front panel of the *shaft*, there are also those of Morley, a lion rampant crowned; of Bouchier (?) three water bougets; and on the fourth shield the monogram I. H. S., miscalled by Blomefield either "the arms of St. George or a cross floré."

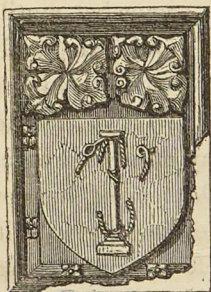
Whether the families of Morley or Bouchier had any and what connection with the church, as Lords of the Manor, donors of the Font, or benefactors, has not been ascertained; but from their arms being found in this position, we may conclude that they had some such claim to that particular distinction. In reference to this subject the following remarks, extracted from the introduction to Mr. Paley's work on *Fonts*, may be acceptable:

"The correct taste generally shewn by the mediæval artists in ecclesiastical devices, probably made them feel the unfitness of heraldry in this position. Certain it is, that in an age which gloried in that science, and when every church wall and window exhibited some badge of chivalrous distinction, comparatively few such devices were allowed to have place on Fonts. Admitting that heraldic bearings are unsuitable to such purposes as this, we doubt whether the custom, sparingly as it certainly was adopted, deserves the strong reprobation it has sometimes met with. Certainly, heraldry is the least objectionable way of commemorating a person without the parade of a name: and whether founder, benefactor, or donor of the Font, Bishop of the Diocese, or Lord of the Manor, the compliment was a harmless one, and not necessarily dictated by a love of worldly pride or family distinction."

The instruments of the Passion and a Crucifix occupy four of the panels of the *bowl* alternately with the emblems of the



Evangelists. Three of these are seen in the drawing: the fourth, containing the pillar, cords, and crown of thorns, is shown in *fig. 1*. The fifth contains the eagle of St. John, *fig. 2*. The sixth, a Crucifix somewhat mutilated, *fig. 3*. The seventh, the winged bull of St. Luke, *fig. 4*: and the eighth, the spear, sponge and vessel for the vinegar, very perfect, *fig. 5*.

*Fig. 1.**Fig. 2.**Fig. 3.**Fig. 4.**Fig. 5.*



The ornaments of the lower portion of the bowl are angels with expanded wings, alternating with a winged heart, from which issues a little stem bearing a quatrefoil.

The height of the Font, as shown by the engraving, is three feet six inches, the shaft being one foot ten inches; the panels are each one foot wide. The interior bowl is twenty inches in diameter and fifteen deep. The original drain remains, and still serves as an outlet for the water used at baptisms. Although the ornaments are somewhat mutilated, the devices upon them are plainly distinguishable, and furnish as satisfactory materials as any from which to infer their date. The design, though not of unfrequent occurrence in the County, is not to be met with in any other church in the Hundred of South Erpingham or the Deanery of Ingworth.

The Aylsham Font probably occupies its original site at the West end of the Church, to the left of the centre aisle. In the early part of the seventeenth century a Baptistry, or canopy of heavy and costly workmanship, was erected over it—by whom we know not—and still exists. The steps of the Font have been reduced so as to form a square block of masonry, the surface of which is level with the floor of this cumbrous structure,—an arrangement which completely destroys the effect of the proportions of the Font.

It is recorded that the roof and screens of the Church were much adorned with painting and elaborate work, about the year 1507, by John Jannys and Thomas Wymer, the latter of whom is buried in the chancel; but no earlier certain notices now exist of the fabric, and we can only conjecture the dates of the different parts of it, from the style, and the brasses and scattered memorials of the various benefactors.

Aylsham, December, 1847.