

A MEDIEVAL STONE COFFIN AND FUNERAL CHALICE FROM HARWELL CHURCH

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THE STONE COFFIN with cross coffin lid, noted by Walker¹ as having been found beneath the floor of the north side of the nave during the restoration of 1867, was again uncovered on 16 October 1963 during work by Mr. D. Jordan for the installation of underfloor heating. It lay under the easternmost bay of the north arcade with the head of the coffin pointing to the west.

The gentle coped lid (Fig. 1 and Plate I) has a cross in low relief with expanded arms and a three-step base. The coffin (Fig. 1) is tapered on one side only (suggesting that it was designed to occupy a position against a north wall) while the head is recessed. The stone of the coffin and lid is Great Oolite from the Taynton quarries near Burford.

Numerous sepulchral monuments of the medieval period were recorded² in the 18th and 19th centuries by Gough, Boutell and Cutts. The brass effigies which came into general use on tombs in the 14th century were preceded by lids with floriated crosses either incised or in low relief. There is a 10 ft. long memorial slab in Purbeck marble with such an incised cross in the chancel of Harwell church which can be attributed to Roger de Marlowe, rector 1292–1310, in whose time the chancel was rebuilt. The stone coffin now uncovered belongs, however, to an earlier 11th and 12th century style, in which an expanded-armed cross was employed on the coffin lid. These became popular in the second half of the 12th century and about that time the base of the cross was frequently carved to give a three-step base. Examples occur in districts such as the Cotswolds, Derbyshire and Yorkshire where suitable stone was available. For this Harwell tomb, Mr. L. A. S. Butler has expressed the opinion that the details indicate a late 12th century date.

Cross coffin lids are relatively rare in the N. Berkshire region: some 13th century examples in Caen stone occur in the Lambourn valley³ and three were found last century at Woodperry, Oxon⁴—its church like that of Harwell was associated with Oseney Abbey and the Honor of St. Valery. There is another, apparently unrecorded, example, in the south transept of Cumnor church below the double canopy, which is contemporary with the building c. 1330 of this transept. On the east is the tomb attributed to William de Cumnor, abbot of Abingdon and therefore Rector of Cumnor, who died in 1332: the other recess is occupied by a tomb in which the cross and stepped base on the lid is now barely decipherable. It is suggested that it is a 12th century tomb moved from the chancel (which was rebuilt about the time the transept was made.) If this is the tomb of another abbot of Abingdon, it must be no later than 1189, as Robert de Henrett, abbot from 1189–1221, is known to have been buried in the abbey.⁵

¹J. W. Walker, *Berks. Arch. J.*, 36 (1932), 21.

²R. Gough, *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain*, I (1786). C. Boutell, *Christian Monuments in England and Wales*, 1854. E. L. Cutts, *Manual for the Study of Sepulchral Slabs and Crosses*, 1849. also, J. C. Cox, *English Church Fittings, Furniture and Accessories*, 1923.

³*Berks., Bucks. and Oxon. Arch. J.*, XXVII (1922), 117–127. *Victoria County History, Berks.*, IV, 237.

⁴*Arch. J.*, III (1847), 127.

⁵*Victoria County History, Berks.*, II, 53.

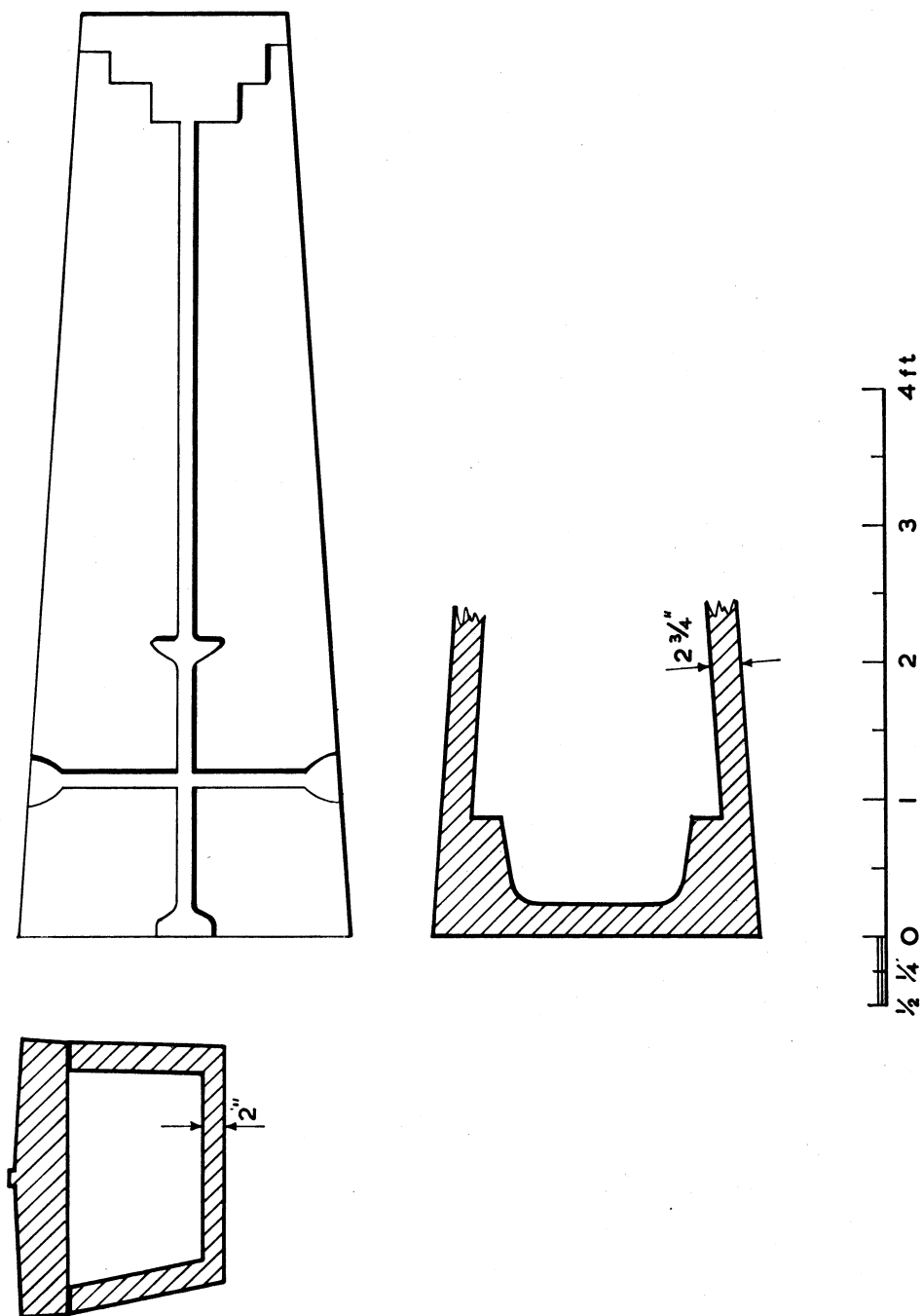


Fig. 1. Harwell Church. Cross Coffin Lid and Sections of Coffin

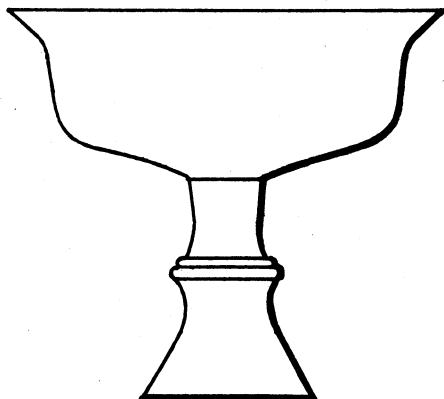


Fig. 2. Pewter chalice from the stone coffin in Harwell Church. Diameter at lip $4\frac{1}{2}$ in.

The Harwell coffin contained the skeleton of a priest and a chalice (Plate II), reference to both of which was made by Walker. From the evidence of the teeth, the priest died when beyond middle age: the cephalic index of the skull is 0.82, the length and breadth being 183 and 149 mm.

The shape of the chalice (Fig. 2) with its pronounced lip and wide bowl places it in Group III, dated *c.* 1180–1280, of Oman's¹ categories. It is composed of a lead-tin alloy, in which the proportion of lead (64% by weight) is substantially higher than in the pewter vessels that were used for communion; it is clearly a replica, made for burial purposes, as seems to have been the general practice. Apart from silver (0.5%), copper (0.2%), antimony (0.03%) and a trace of iron, 21 other metals were undetectable (by emission spectroscopy). The chalice found associated with a cross coffin lid at East Shefford in the Lambourn valley, was probably similar.

The sequence of medieval extensions to the church of *c.* 1100 at Harwell included the building of a north transept and narrow north aisle towards the end of the 12th century. The transitional Norman arch between this early transept and aisle survives; above it are the corbels for the relatively low transept. It is possible that the priest buried in this tomb died shortly after the completion of this extension, the tomb being originally placed against the north wall of the aisle. Removal of the coffin to its present position must have occurred after the date of the construction (*c.* 1230) of the present nave arcade, as the foundations of one of the piers was affected: a 14th century date for the removal is likely, as the wall of the north aisle was rebuilt about that time to accommodate larger windows.

At the conclusion of the work in 1963, the coffin was left *in situ*, but was covered with sand prior to the laying of the concrete foundations for the underfloor heating. The coffin-lid and chalice (repaired at the Ashmolean Museum) will be displayed in the church.

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¹C. Oman, *English Church Plate*, 1957.