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On the Ancient Church Plate at Cirencester

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ON SOME ANCIENT CHURCH PLATE
AT CIRENCESTER.

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IT WAS with some hesitation that the writer ventured to lay before the Cirencester Meeting some notes on the ancient Church Plate of that Parish, fearing that the subject might prove to be one of somewhat less than general interest. A subject that has not attracted much attention is possibly not worth it, and in the course of enquiries into the antiquities of church plate, it appeared of one parish after another that whilst zealous antiquaries had examined the peal of bells, the painted glass, the monumental brasses, the font, the mural decorations, and the carved oak rood-screen, no one had ever asked after the communion plate. The next few pages may serve to show that though church plate, perhaps owing to the fact that goldsmiths' marks are not generally understood, lies in a somewhat unexplored corner, it is as interesting as other subjects of archæological enquiry.

The misfortunes which befel the goods of the Church in England during the sixteenth century, and the simplicity of later ritual, have shortened the history of our church plate as it at present exists, a good deal, but some few historical remarks are necessary to enable us to understand what we find. It is to be feared that all the important examples of pre-Reformation art now left in England may be counted on the fingers; for the rest, cathedral and church alike possess certain simple articles of communion plate, of dates ranging from the reign of Edward VI. to the present time, varying more in their size and number, than in their design and character.

It is difficult to realise the splendour of the display that would have met the eye of him who entered one of our great cathedrals, or wealthy parish churches, on any high festival day in the three

or four centuries that preceded the Reformation. The monks were the goldsmiths of the Middle Ages ; St. Dunstan himself was the patron of the craft in England ; what wonder, then, that the Church, the nursing mother of the arts, which lent themselves in their turn to the adornment of her services, could boast of a wealth of gold and silver in her treasuries and shrines that is almost incredible.

The Episcopal constitutions which may be found recorded in Lyndwood give a long list of the church requisites of those days—a list that, in times of controversy on questions of ritualistic detail, has an enhanced interest. Suffice it to say that the evidence which remains to us in the way of archidiaconal visitations is enough to show that even country village churches were amply supplied with all that was proper. Even in the reign of Edward VI., the goods of the parish churches were of great value years after the events of his father's reign had bestowed the still greater treasures of cathedral and monastery upon the King, under the general name of "church-stuff."

It is hardly fair, then, to credit Henry VIII. and his advisers with the whole of the spoliation which was witnessed by the quarter of a century which commenced in 1536. Succeeding reigns must bear their share of the blame, for the seizure of old parish-church plate was not decided upon till the very last year of Edward VI., and its destruction was not completed without the aid of the Protestant reaction that came in with Queen Elizabeth.

A great deal, too, was made away with by the parochial authorities themselves, who, alarmed at the misfortunes which had fallen upon their more powerful neighbours, the monasteries and guilds, took advantage of the excuse afforded by the necessity of altering and adapting their churches to the new and simpler ritual, and of repairing the damage done by the destruction of painted glass, images, and all that savoured of what was called "Popish superstition," to dispose of a portion of their more valuable property to meet those extraordinary expenses. This practice became so common that the Commissioners sent through-

out England in almost every year of the reign of Edward VI. professed to take their Inventories for the purpose of ensuring the proper preservation of what was left. Indeed, their proceedings go far to show that whilst much that was valuable had been alienated by the churchwardens for repairs and other like expenses, real or pretended, neither plunder nor embezzlement from other quarters had done much harm.

But everybody knew what these Inventories really meant, and as it was increasingly doubtful how much of the money realised by such sales churchwardens would be allowed to keep, never mind what they had professedly spent it upon, they seem to have constantly represented that their churches had been broken into by thieves and robbed since the last inventory was taken. If these returns are to be believed, there was hardly a parish church in some counties which was not broken into once a year at this period.

By open and acknowledged sales, however, large quantities of Church goods came into private hands, and this disposes, to some extent, of the charges so loudly made by Heylin and Fuller of general plunder and spoliation. Both these authorities comment upon the parlours hung with altar cloths, tables and beds covered with copes, and carousing cups made of chalices; Fuller adding "As if first laying hands upon them were sufficient title unto them, seizing on them was generally the price they had payed for them."

So things went on until the last year of Edward VI., when the final step was taken of seizing on all that was then left, or nearly all, for even then the Commissioners were directed to leave in each Parish Church "one, two, or more chalices, or cuppes, according to the multitude of people."

For this course the Crown had the excuse that by this time all the repairs and alterations rendered necessary by the Reformation had been effected, and that what was still over, after making due provision for the future use of the Church, according to the simplified ritual of King Edward's second Prayer-Book, was superfluous, if not superstitious, and in either case proper for conversion to His Majesty's use.

Here, then, is the end of all the old plate, except one or two chalices in each church; and it may be asked where are they? Will not they form a remnant by which to judge the work of the ecclesiastical goldsmith of earlier times?

Alas, it must be said that they, too, have nearly all, but not quite all, perished; for whilst the instructions issued to the royal commissioners directed their preservation, the King's injunctions, followed by those of his sister, Queen Elizabeth, a few years later, and by the visitation articles of the prelates of her reign, went far by their tone, if not by their express terms, to ensure the destruction of such articles as "monuments of superstition."

Under this popular term was included everything connected with the pre-Reformation ritual, especially such things as bore sacred emblems or images, and vessels that had been used at the mass would be least of all likely to escape. The returns made by parochial authorities at one time and another in answer to the enquiries of Royal Commissioners, show us only too plainly how they were dealt with.¹

Thus, these few remaining ancient chalices fell under the ban, and, sooner or later, got melted up into what were called "communion cups," that they might be carefully distinguished from the unreformed chalices.

Of the beautiful Gothic chalices of days prior to these events but some half-dozen remain. The writer does not know of a single one in Gloucestershire, but Somersetshire can boast of two, Oxford University of two more, one at Trinity College and the other at Corpus Christi College; Leominster has one; and there are one or two other less notable instances of them. The earliest known is at Nettlecombe, in Somersetshire, and was originally described by Mr. Octavius Morgan in "The Archaeologia."² A few of the

¹ Those who are interested in the subject may consult the Returns made by the Commissioners of the reigns of Edward VI. and Elizabeth, many of which are preserved in the Public Record Office. Some of these have been printed in the Transactions of the Norfolk, Surrey, Kent, and other Archaeological Societies; Peacock's "*Church Furniture*;" and Cripps' "*Old English Plate*." To Mr. Murray, the publisher of the latter work, we are indebted for the illustrations to this paper.

² Vol. xlii., 405.

earliest Protestant communion cups, made under these circumstances in the reign of Edward VI., are extant; two of them are still the property of the parish of St. Margaret's, Westminster.

What a change had taken place! Instead of the small and exquisitely shaped bowl, on a Gothic stem, adorned with a crucifix engraven or enamelled, we have an immense cup wholly unadorned with any emblem whatever, but adapted by its size for the administration of the wine to the laity, a return to the early practices of the Church, which was finally directed at the meeting of Convocation in 1562.

Most of these cups, however, soon shared the fate of the chalices which preceded them, for they were, of course, quite unfit for the restored ritual of Queen Mary's reign, and in the result they are as rare as the chalices.

We now come to the more settled reign of her sister, Elizabeth, when the last of the chalices disappeared, with the exception of the half dozen examples above mentioned, which must have owed their preservation to some favouring local circumstance in each case, for such things were hunted even out of private houses and private hands whenever it was possible. During the first years of the Queen's reign, inclination and injunction seemed to work in harmony, and every parish vied with its neighbour in the haste with which it melted up what remained of its plate, and procured a communion cup for future use.¹ Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, enquired of his clergy in 1569, "whether they do minister in any prophane cups, bowls, dishes, or chalices heretofore used at masse, or els in a decent communion cup provided and kept for the same purpose only." Even as late as 1576, Archbishop Grindal found it necessary to enquire of incumbent and churchwarden "Whether you have in your parish churches or chapels a fair and comely communion cup of silver, and a cover of silver for the same, which may serve for the ministracion of the communion bread."

¹ In the Churchwarden's accounts of the parish of St. Petroc, Exeter, for 1571, occurs the following item:—"Paid Iohn Ions, goldsmith, for changing the Chalice into a Cup, £1 15s. 5d." The cup bears this maker's mark, [I] [IONS], a mark frequently found on Exeter plate.—[ED.]

And not only were they so provided, but it is of interest to know that in many a Gloucestershire church the very same "fair and comely communion cup" is in existence and in use at the present day.

The magnificent cups belonging to Cirencester Church are of 1570, and were procured under these circumstances, though they are not quite of the usual pattern but of the fashion of the somewhat earlier cups of the reign of Edward VI., which are larger and plainer than those of later date.



This variation, is, however, accounted for by the curious fact that the Cirencester cups prove to have been made by the very same London goldsmith as the earlier cups at St. Margaret's, Westminster, which are of the year 1552, and are, perhaps, of a pattern long established in his particular workshop.

Elizabethan cups of the ordinary type are to be found broadcast, and in most cases carefully preserved and valued, over the whole length and breadth of England. There are sixteen, if not more, within a walk of Cirencester, and as many in one county as in another. Examples may be found at Preston, Daglingworth, Kemble, Avening, Barnton, Cricklade, Somerford Keynes, Winchcombe, and many other places in the diocese of Gloucester.

The one curious feature about these interesting cups is, that go where you will, North, South, East, or West, near London or far away, the ornamentation upon them is invariably the same. A simple double belt running round the bowl, crossed or interlaced at intervals, and having in the space between the bands an undulating tendril of foliage resembling the common woodbine, which is the only decoration they bear, though it varies in its degree of elaboration and finish.

It is singular that no authority or direction has ever been found prescribing this pattern or style of ornament. The Statutes, the Proceedings of Convocation, Canons, Constitutions, Injunctions of all kinds, the pages of Burnet and Strype, and the Registers of the Privy Council, have been searched in vain for any specific direction that would account for an extraordinary uniformity of shape and pattern that could have hardly been the result of the taste or caprice of churchwarden or silversmith. There is one suggestion open, and that is, that as the cups with this particular pattern of belt are found in 1562 and onwards, but not earlier, some regulation or recommendation on the subject, though unrecorded, may have emanated from the Convocation held in London in that year, at which many important matters concerning the doctrine, rites, and discipline of the Church were settled. True, it may be said that if such order were taken in Convocation, the records would show it, but the direction must have come from somewhere, almost

certainly in 1562, and our conjecture will have answered a good purpose if it should elicit some better one. No long time ago it was generally thought that these cups were all made to order, and issued one to each parish by Government, under an Act of Parliament. It is hardly necessary to say that there is no such Act in existence. They are of provincial as well as London make; plenty come from York, Exeter, and Norwich, and they bear the private marks of a multitude of different makers. Again, though there is this curious general likeness, no two are exactly alike; there are interesting local peculiarities to be observed in the fashion adopted at Exeter, and also at Norwich, and there is here in Gloucestershire everything from a tall vessel more than a foot high, like those at Cirencester, to the tiny cup of some Cotswold village weighing no more than five or six ounces, and destitute of all ornament but the usual belt scratched as rudely as if with the point of a knife by the village smith. Such are still in use at Winstone and Baunton, villages near Cirencester. Between these two extremes of size come the beautiful specimens that are preserved at Preston and Kemble.

Well would it be if fewer such cups were seen in the windows of the modern silversmith. Many, if not most of them, are made of the very same silver as the more ancient chalices that they replaced, a vessel that has perchance belonged to its parish from time immemorial. It is to be feared that they are constantly parted with for the mere price of the silver, by those who are ignorant, or regardless, of the curious historical associations which surround these interesting relics.

Of more modern cups there is little to be said. They are of plain shape, plainer and ruder as we get towards the end of the seventeenth century; those of the reign of Queen Anne are a little more uniform, with narrower and cylindrical bowls. An example at Coates is a good illustration of the fashion of the earlier part of the eighteenth century. It is part of the communion plate presented to that parish by Louise, Lady Atkins, a sister of the then rector, and widow of the great county historian, Sir Robert Atkins.

All rules have exceptions, and this holds good in the case of church chalices. Besides the forms already mentioned, cups of exceptional shape are occasionally found, amongst them some of great excellence; sometimes they are secular drinking cups, that have been devoted by the piety and liberality of their owners to more sacred purposes.¹ We may safely say that the most beautiful of all these is a cup at Cirencester, which is of almost priceless value and of unique interest, for it must have been made for some member of the Boleyn family, and in all probability made for the unfortunate Anne Boleyn herself.



¹ There is a very fine example of a cup of this kind used as a Communion Cup at St. Maben, in Cornwall. It is of elegant form, 13-ins. in height, the cover being surmounted by a boy, nude, holding a shield. The mouth of the cup is 3½-ins. in diameter. The bowl and cover

Its cover is surmounted by the badge of her family—the crowned falcon and sceptre—and an examination of the goldsmith's mark proves the year of its manufacture to have been 1535, being the year before her execution.

The badge had, many years ago, attracted the notice of the Rev. E. A. Fuller, and upon his authority the cup has long been credited with a royal descent, which goes far, be it said, to account for its coming into the possession of the parish of Cirencester.

It will be remembered that the eventual grantee of the lands of the Abbey of Cirencester in 1565 was Dr. Richard Master, physician to Queen Elizabeth, and it will also be remembered that the custom of giving New Year's gifts by the sovereign to every member of her court was, at that day, invariable; as invariable as the return of a present of equal or greater value by the subject, a point to which the attention of the court officials seems to have been carefully directed. A cup was the usual royal gift, and Dr. Master must have been the recipient of several. What more probable than that some amongst the cups issued from the royal treasury on these occasions bore the badge of the queen's unfortunate mother or the family to which she belonged, and that such a cup given one New Year's day to Dr. Master was afterwards presented by him to the church of the parish which he and his descendants from that time to this have made their home.

We should now turn to the Communion flagons, which are of the year 1576, and are of the same interest as the cups, for they represent the earliest form of flagon introduced after the Reformation.

are engraved in arabesque style, with birds and foliage—the birds consisting of two storks, and another bird—and the stem and foot are ornamented in repoussée work. It bears the hall-mark of 1576, the maker's mark being a pair of compasses, enclosing a mullet, on an oblong-shaped die.—(*Hist. of Trigg Minor*, vol. I., p. 469). This device is not mentioned in Cripps' valuable hand-book, "Old English Plate." The cup was probably presented to the Church by one of the Godolphin family, a branch of which resided in the parish about the middle of the 17th century.—ED.



They are usually found in pairs, and this is not so much because one such vessel would not have served the purpose, as attributable to the fact that they in a sort of way succeeded to the cruets or phials of pre-Reformation use, which were always in pairs, and often labelled with the letters V and A respectively, standing the V for "vinum" and the A for "aqua." After the date of the Canons of 1603, which prescribed the use of a "stoup or pot," this pattern gave way to the tall straight-sided flagon, which from

that time is almost invariably found. The earliest of the later pattern in the neighbourhood of Cirencester is one of 1683, at Ampney Crucis, and the earliest known to the writer is of the year 1618, and belongs to Gray's Inn Chapel, in London. It may interest us to know that the flagons at Rendcombe, Gloucestershire, are of the same fashion and nearly as fine as those at Cirencester—being of 1592—and that amongst the latest are those at St. George's Chapel, Windsor, which are of the year 1613.

NOTE.—Since this article has been in type, a very interesting paper on "Elizabethan Communion Plate," from the pen of the Rev. J. Fuller Russell, has appeared in the "Archæological Journal," Vol. xxxv., p. 44.—ED.