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## **Gloucestershire Fonts**

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# GLOUCESTERSHIRE FONTS.

## PART II.

### SAXON AND EARLY WORK.

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VIOLLET-LE-DUC was not acquainted with any font in France anterior to the eleventh century, and certainly very few of our English fonts are of an earlier date. Although at that period every priest could baptise, and therefore every parish would possess a font, yet before that time they appear to have been exceptional and rare. It has been conjectured that many of the earlier vessels may have been basins, and it is probable that a large number of pre-Conquest fonts were nothing better than wooden tubs.<sup>1</sup> It is quite probable that a few of the wooden fonts may have given place to stone fonts of Anglo-Saxon workmanship,<sup>2</sup> while they in their turn were possibly superseded by the work of more skilful Norman masons. The actual number of pre-Norman fonts in England is very limited. It is nearly a quarter of a century since Mr. Alfred E. Hudd, F.S.A., wrote a valuable paper in our *Transactions* on this subject,<sup>3</sup> and our knowledge of pre-Norman fonts has not progressed much since that date. Gloucester-

<sup>1</sup> In Celtic times it was usual to baptise in running water, and in the Anglo-Saxon period it was probably the custom to baptise in holy wells or streams. Mr. Alfred E. Hudd, F.S.A., in his learned paper in our *Transactions* (see vol. xi, pp. 84-104), draws attention to the fact that we possess very few Saxon fonts, that wooden tub-shaped fonts were in use in that period, and that probably the rite of baptism may have been largely administered outside the sacred buildings, after the manner of the ancient British Church.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Francis Bond, in his volume on *Fountains and Font-covers*, is of opinion that plain Anglo-Saxon stone fonts may survive in considerable numbers. It is doubtful, however, if this theory can be maintained, as plain rough work is no proof of very early work, either in fonts or other sculpture.

<sup>3</sup> "Saxon Baptismal Font in Deerhurst Priory Church," by Alfred E. Hudd, F.S.A., vol. xi, pp. 84-104.

shire, however, possesses one of these early ornamented fonts, and it is found in the old Saxon church of Deerhurst, on the banks of the River Severn.

The ancient font at Deerhurst appears to have been ejected from the church at some unknown period. Some conjecture that this took place at the time of the Reformation, while others believe it was in the troublous days of Cromwell; yet it is not impossible that the parishioners themselves removed it at a still earlier date to make room for a brand new font of fourteenth- or fifteenth-century workmanship.

In April, 1845, a drawing of the bowl of the font was exhibited at one of the early meetings of the British Archæological Association by Mr. W. H. Gomonde. He mentioned that it had been kept in a farmyard for some years, and he was afraid it would be seen no more, as it had been sold for the sum of £6 and carried away he knew not where.<sup>1</sup> However, it had fallen into good hands, and Dr. Wilberforce, before he became Bishop of Oxford,<sup>2</sup> was instrumental in again returning it to its sacred use. For a time the bowl was preserved at Longdon Church; but in 1870 Miss Strickland, of Apperley Court, found an upright, carved stone a mile and a half from Deerhurst.<sup>3</sup> This stone was believed to be the stem of the ancient font, as it fitted the bowl so well that it would be indeed strange if they had no connection with each other. Miss Strickland presented a new font to Longdon Church, and the ancient font was again restored to Deerhurst.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Journ. Brit. Arch. Association*, vol. i, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Ashwell's *Life of Bishop Wilberforce*, p. 261.

<sup>3</sup> See *Gloucestershire Notes and Queries*, vol. ii, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> Total height without step (not including 4 or 5 in. let into step) .. .. . ft. in.  
 Diameter across the top .. .. . 3 5  
 Diameter of interior of bowl .. .. . 2 4½  
 Depth of interior of bowl .. .. . 1 1  
 Depth of exterior of bowl .. .. . 1 9  
 Greatest circumference of bowl .. .. . 7 5

The interior of the bowl does not appear ever to have been lined with lead, and originally it had no hole at the bottom to draw off the water, which seems to have been drained off at the side.



The bowl consists of a block of rather coarse-grained oolite, which was probably brought from the neighbouring Cotswold Hills. It is tub-shaped, and the surface is covered with ornamental sculpture. In examining interlacing ornaments on fonts we must not forget that it is never a proof of Saxon work unless it is a highly specialised character known to occur at an early date. In the case of the Deerhurst font, Mr. Francis Bond reminds us in his work on *Fonts and Font-covers* that it is not likely any Norman craftsman could have produced work so characteristically pre-Conquest as this even if he cared to do so. The pattern on the bowl and a portion of the stem consists, says Professor J. O. Westwood, of "spiral lines running off and conjoining with other spirals, forming an endless pattern." The same writer also states that "the most characteristic of all Celtic patterns is that produced by two or three spiral lines starting from a fixed point, their opposite extremities going off to the centres of coils formed by other spiral lines. Instances in metal-work of this pattern occur in several objects found in Ireland and in different parts of England. In stone it occurs only, so far as we are aware, on Deerhurst font. As it does not appear in MSS. executed in England after the ninth century, we may conclude that this is the oldest ornamented work in the country."<sup>1</sup> The late Mr. J. Romilly Allen, F.S.A., when writing of spiral patterns, remarked: "There are, broadly speaking, two distinct forms of spiral patterns used in Celtic art: (1) when the band of which the spiral is formed gradually expands into a trumpet-shaped end; (2) where the band of which the spiral is formed remains the same breadth throughout its whole length. The first of these forms is the earlier of the two, and is copied directly from the metal-work of pagan times."<sup>2</sup> The Deerhurst spirals are of the second or later type. Professor Westwood could not say whether the Irish in the first instance received their styles of ornament from

<sup>1</sup> *Grammar of Ornament (Celtic)*, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.*, 1883-4, pp. 253 and 308.

the early British Christians, or whether it was in Ireland that they originated. He suggests, however, that Byzantium and the East may have afforded the ideas which early Celtic Christian artists developed in the retirement of their monasteries, as it is known that the British and Irish missionaries were constantly travelling to the Holy Land and Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The Bishop of Bristol, whose knowledge of Celtic ornamentation is so wide and extensive, says that this famous font "has the same remarkable combination of unmistakable Irish work with work of a diametrically opposite character, an elegant classical arabesque. For the Irish influence, Maildubh's presence may afford a sufficient explanation; for the other part of the artistic work I am disposed not to look to Anglican or any other home influence, but to look boldly to the foreign source, as I believe, of the beautiful work of the Northumbrian Angles, and to look to that source at a date which gives to our Wessex art a great antiquity."<sup>2</sup> He argues that Birinus, with his Lombardic connection, baptised the King of Wessex at the Oxford Dorchester in 635; and the Northumbrian Oswald, being by chance at the Court at the time, having come for his bride, the King's daughter, Birinus would naturally establish at once a certain amount of religious pomp and apparatus, and that it would be like in style to that to which he had been accustomed in his home in North Italy, presumably with some blending of the kind of ornament which he found in popular acceptance among his flock. The Bishop of Bristol reminds us that Deerhurst is on the Severn, and that the influence which gave Italian and Irish work to the district south of Malmesbury may conceivably have extended across the border to a distance not so great. "If that is not the explanation of the Deerhurst font," says the Bishop, "it remains a coincidence which demands an explanation, that the two examples on a considerable scale of this most un-English pattern are found on either side

<sup>1</sup> *Grammar of Ornament (Celtic)*, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> *St. Aldhelm: his Life and Times*, p. 177.

of the great Wessex monastery of Aldhelm, founded by an Irishman." <sup>1</sup>

Mr. Hudd reminds us, in his valuable paper on the Deerhurst font, <sup>2</sup> that although the most distinctive characteristic of Celtic art is the absence of foliage, yet there are examples existing of diverging spirals and foliage on the same stone. The famous stone at St. Vigean's <sup>3</sup> has been identified with a Pictish king of the name of Drost, who was slain in the year 729, and one of the sides is described by Dr. Anderson as "a foliaceous scroll with lanceolate leaves, and a triplet of fruit alternately on either side of the wavy stem." <sup>4</sup> This description reminds us of the scroll-work on the Deerhurst font, although it does not represent the same plant. The Ruthwell Cross, in Annandale, was made by Cædman, and he died in 680 A.D. The foliaceous enrichments on this celebrated cross are described by Dr. Anderson as "running scrolls representing a vine, with its branches alternately recurved, and bearing grapes in symmetrical clusters, a bird or beast lodging in each of the branches, and feeding on the fruit." <sup>5</sup> Mr. Hudd is of opinion that the artist did not intend to represent a vine on the Deerhurst font, but endeavoured to portray the "trailing dog-rose" (*Rosa arvensis*), and he draws attention to the fact that at Britford Church, near Salisbury, there is an ancient archway decorated with Celtic or Saxon interlaced work, the borders of which much resemble the borders of the Deerhurst font. <sup>6</sup> These two scrolls portray different plants, yet the connecting links by which the sprays are united are very similar. These little connecting links, technically called "garters," are probably copied from goldsmiths' work, for which the Saxons were celebrated. <sup>7</sup> Similar connecting links are on the Ruthwell Cross, and also

<sup>1</sup> *Theodore and Wilfrith*, p. 272.

<sup>2</sup> *Trans. B. and G. Arch. Soc.*, vol. xi, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> *Scotland in Early Christian Times*, 2nd Series, pp. 198-200.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194, fig. 125.      <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, figs. 142, 143, and pp. 238, 244 n.

<sup>6</sup> *Journ. Brit. Arch. Assoc.*, vol. xxxii, p. 497.

<sup>7</sup> *Proc. Clifton Antiq. Club* (1885), vol. i, p. 20.

on the beautiful cross at Bakewell. Mr. Hudd suggests the possibility that these scroll patterns were imitated from Roman mosaic pavements by pre-Norman workmen, and he reminds us that the Woodchester pavement, with its border of scroll-work, is only a few miles south of Deerhurst, and that foliaceous patterns are quite a common feature on Samian ware.

We have already referred to Mr. Hudd's remarks on the Ruthwell Cross and the famous stone at St. Vigean's, having foliaceous enrichments somewhat of the same character as the two bands on the Deerhurst font.<sup>1</sup> The Ruthwell Cross is ascribed to the closing years of the seventh century, and the St. Vigean's stone to the first half of the eighth century. If the Bishop of Bristol's conjecture is correct, then the Deerhurst font is a little earlier than the Ruthwell Cross.

The early date assigned to the Deerhurst font by so eminent a scholar as the Bishop of Bristol forces us to ask the somewhat pertinent question whether stone fonts existed in England at that date. We hesitate to give any definite reply, but we feel that there is much force in the contention that these ancient Saxon fonts may have been originally constructed for well-covers. Mr. Hudd reminds us, in his paper on the Deerhurst font, that "a stone object, somewhat resembling the upper part of the Deerhurst font, is represented in an ancient MS. in the British Museum,<sup>2</sup> the ornamental decoration with which it is covered consisting entirely of spirals. This represents, however, not a baptismal font, but a sculptured stone well-cover, such as one often sees in North Italy." The same writer adds that "it is quite possible that the so-called 'Saxon Font' in South Hayling Church, Hampshire, which, according to Longcroft,<sup>3</sup> 'was found in 1827 in a shallow well in the south parish,' may have been a Saxon well-cover, rather than a baptismal font. As described and figured by

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. B. and G. Arch. Soc.*, vol. xi, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Cotton MS., "Nero," c. iv.

<sup>3</sup> "Biographical Account of the Hundred of Bosmere."

Mr. J. Harris,<sup>1</sup> this interesting relic, when discovered, consisted of a square block of limestone measuring 2 ft. 3 in. at the top, having a large hole at the bottom, which permitted the water to flow in from the spring, and a smaller hole at the side allowing it to escape into the adjacent pond. All four faces are ornamented with geometrical figures of early character, among which divergent spirals are clearly visible." If well-covers were in use in early times in England as we know they were in Italy, and were used for holy wells in which persons were baptised, may not the Deerhurst font, in its present condition, consist of the covering stones, or well-heads, of two of these holy wells? The Deerhurst bowl does not appear ever to have been lined with lead, and originally it had no hole at the bottom to draw off the water, which seems to have been drained off at the side. These facts favour the theory that this famous font may have consisted of two well-heads.

The neighbouring parish of Elmstone, called in Domesday Book "Almondston," belonged to the monks of Deerhurst, and it is of interest to note that the remarkable fragment of a sculptured stone preserved in that church is covered on three faces with diverging spirals of the C type, resembling those on the Deerhurst font. The sides of this stone have been bevelled off, and it may have been used as a holy-water stoup in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, yet it is quite probable that the square hole on the top is part of the original cross.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Jour. Brit. Arch. Assoc.* (1886), vol. xlii, p. 65, pl. 7.

<sup>2</sup> The present fragment is 2 ft. 4 in. in height, and has a rectangular hole ( $8\frac{1}{2}$  in. by 9 in. by  $5\frac{1}{2}$  in.) at the top. The four corners have been roughly bevelled off at some period, and consequently the stone now presents the appearance of an octagon. The spirals have diameters varying from 4 in. to 5 in., and each pair vary in length from 8 in. to 10 in. The Rev. George Bayfield Roberts, M.A., the Vicar of Elmstone, considers that the stone had the corners bevelled off in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, so that it might be used as a holy-water stoup. The hole at the top may then have been made for that purpose, but it is possible that it once formed part of the cross, and that the hole is original. One face of the original stone has no ornament upon it, while the other three faces have been adorned with the spiral pattern.

It has been conjectured that this stone was the pedestal of the Deerhurst font. Mr. Hudd, however, has proved conclusively that the Elmstone fragment never formed part of a font, and that the pedestal now at Deerhurst is in its right place.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Hudd is also of opinion that the spiral work on the present pedestal at Deerhurst is more like that on the body of the font than are the Elmstone spirals, being enclosed in panels; that it fits the upper part of the font much better than the Elmstone fragment could ever have fitted it; and that the intimate connection between Deerhurst and Elmstone in Saxon times is quite sufficient to account for a stone which was probably a portion of a cross being ornamented with a similar pattern.

The pedestal of the Deerhurst font is adorned with divergent spirals, resembling those on the bowl enclosed in similar panels, but separated from each other by panels ornamented with interlacing strap-work. The upper part is decorated with seven panels, of which four contain the spiral ornaments. The lower portion has been cut down, and now forms an octagonal stem inserted in an octagonal step, which is probably of fourteenth- or fifteenth-century date. It is difficult to conjecture when the stem was cut, but it was probably done by mediæval workmen.

The ancient font in Chester Cathedral is of foreign workmanship, and was presented by the late Duke of Westminster. Such gifts are rare, and with the exception of the Tournai bowls,<sup>2</sup> most of our fonts have been made in England. Quite recently, however, the Church of St. John the Baptist, The Lea,<sup>3</sup> has been enriched by a white marble sculptured bowl and elegant pedestal of considerable antiquity. This beautiful

<sup>1</sup> *Trans. B. and G. Arch. Soc.*, vol. xi, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Winchester Cathedral, Southampton (St. Michael's), East Meon, St. Mary Bourne, Lincoln Minster, Thornton Curtis, and St. Peter's, Ipswich.

<sup>3</sup> This parish is in the Diocese of Gloucester, but a portion is situated in Herefordshire.



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FONT, ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST,  
THE LEA.

gift has been presented by Mrs. Hope-Edwardes in memory of her mother,<sup>1</sup> and was purchased from a London dealer, who received it direct from Italy. The bowl<sup>2</sup> was originally a holy-water stoup, possessing no drain; but it has now been re-dedicated, and in future will serve as a font for the rite of baptism.

The bowl is ornamented round the top with a narrow band of mosaic ( $\frac{3}{4}$  inch), composed of gold diamonds set in triangles of dark blue, having a border above and below of alternate red and white triangles. Beneath a conventional pattern ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches) is a richly-sculptured band ( $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches), containing eight scenes—

1. A man rowing a boat with mast and sail.
2. An ass trampling on a crowned dragon.
3. A merman holding his two tails with each hand. This scene has been re-carved and inserted in the bowl on another piece of marble.
4. Serpent coiled round a lion.
5. Man with large fish (? dolphin).
6. Dog with long ears having placed the forefeet on the back of a ram is biting it.
7. Two mermaids with long hair holding each other by the hand.
8. A bird (? eagle) pecking the head of a large fish.

The bowl rests on a pillar<sup>3</sup> having a coil or knot about half-way down it, while the capital consists of the heads of four rams with horns entwined placed on a wreath of leaves. The moulded base<sup>4</sup> of the pillar is laid on the broad

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Sarah Decima Bradney.

	ft.	in.
<sup>2</sup> Diameter across the top .. .. .	2	0
Diameter of the interior .. .. .	1	8
Depth of interior .. .. .	0	6
Depth of exterior .. .. .	0	8

<sup>3</sup> The pillar is 1 ft. 7 in. high, having a circumference at the top of  $10\frac{1}{2}$  in., and  $12\frac{1}{2}$  in. at the bottom. The column is made to represent a double twist or knot about half-way down it.

<sup>4</sup> 6 in. by 6 in. by 1 in.

back of an elephant<sup>1</sup> with a cloth hanging over it, the ends of which nearly touch the ground on either side. This cloth is edged with an inlay similar to the mosaic border round the top of the bowl, while either side is adorned with a saint vested in a cope and placed in a niche. The left hand of each figure holds a plain, open scroll, while the right hand of one is upraised and the other carries a closed book.

The various experts that have been consulted agree in considering that the bowl dates from the early years of the twelfth century, or more probably it was made during the last quarter of the eleventh century. It is just possible that the capital with the heads of the four rams is of later date, and in that case the whole has been constructed out of different fragments. The elephant, however, is met with in Italian art of the period when the bowl was sculptured, and Mr. S. Montague Peartree reminds us that elephants like this one adorn Archbishop Urso's throne in the Duomo at Canosa (1078-89); others may be seen in the pavement at Otranto and among the architectural features of Altamura. The geometrical inlay is also in keeping with the district and the date, and we hazard the conjecture that this eleventh-century stoup now used as a font in an English church came from the Adriatic side of Southern Italy.

In a few instances Roman altars have been converted into fonts. There is one at Chollerton, another at St. John Lee, and an interesting example is found at Haydon Bridge, Northumberland, where the pagan inscription has been carefully removed with a chisel. In the church at Staunton may be seen a very primitive-looking font. It is constructed out of a large block of stone into a rough cubical shape.<sup>2</sup> The rim is 2 inches thick, and the bowl is about 1 foot internal depth, having the four sides bevelled so as to leave a flat bottom of 11 inches square with a drain in the centre. The four outer faces of the font have three bands carved round the

<sup>1</sup> 1 ft. 6 in. long by 10 in. high.

<sup>2</sup> 2 ft. 5 in. in height, 1 ft. 10 in. in width, and 1 ft. 11 in. in length.



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FONT, STAUNTON.



STONE, ELMSTONE.

upper portion of them.<sup>1</sup> The upper and lower bands are quite plain, but the middle one is decorated with the well-known Norman pellet moulding. The adornment of the lower portion is very simple, having four lines on each face converging towards a point, but not meeting. The outer spaces between the lines are cut away, so that we have four rudely-shaped, sunken lozenges at the corners.<sup>2</sup>

This font is commonly designated as a Roman altar which was converted into a Christian baptismal font at some much later date. The Rev. Canon Scarth wrote a paper on the Staunton font, which was published in our *Transactions*,<sup>3</sup> and he endeavoured to prove that the font was probably made in Saxon times. He argued that it could never have been a Roman altar, because they were frequently 4 feet in height, while this stone was only about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet; that Roman altars were barely  $1\frac{1}{2}$  feet in width, while this measured nearly 2 feet; that Roman altars were frequently plain, squared shafts, having bases and capitals resembling short, stunted columns, and that the top of each had the focus usually with a round scroll on each side, forming the ornaments of the projecting capital, while the Staunton stone never possessed base and capitals. Mr. Francis Bond, however, thinks it is called a Roman altar because the Staunton font is confused with the Roman altar in the vestry at Tretire.<sup>4</sup>

It is quite true that the Staunton font is more cubical in shape than many Roman altars, although some are more elongated than the dimensions given by Canon Scarth, and if it were ever a Roman altar it was of very simple construction. However, it is admitted by Canon Scarth that Roman remains have been found at Staunton, and we know that Ariconium,

<sup>1</sup> Each band is 2 in.

<sup>2</sup> 1 ft. 3 in. to 1 ft. by 1 ft. 7 in. to 1 ft. 6 in.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. v, p. 67; illustrated, pt. iv. It is also illustrated in H. G. Nicholls' *Forest of Dean*, p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> *Fonts and Font-covers*, p. 99.

a Roman station between Gleavum and Magna Castra, is not far distant. <sup>1</sup>

The theory that the Staunton font was originally a Roman altar does not seem altogether untenable, and it would certainly bear some resemblance to one if its present decoration were removed. It is not improbable that the men who built the Norman church at Staunton found a Roman altar, or more probably a Roman stone used in the rough as building material, <sup>2</sup> and after carving some decoration upon it converted it into a font for their new church. Certainly it is unlikely to have been a Saxon font, and the late Sir John Maclean reminds us that in the parish church of English Bicknor there is an abacus of a Norman capital with a band of ornament very similar to the one on the Staunton font. <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ariconium was the centre of several Roman roads: (1) from Gloucester to Ross; (2) to Monmouth, crossing the Wye below Goodrich. There was a short cut to the Roman road running north from Monmouth to Shrewsbury, through Kenchester, joining Weston with Kenchester, and passing by Fownhope. At various periods urns, statues, vases, fibulæ, have been discovered, and in the reign of George II pieces of bronze and many coins were unearthened.

<sup>2</sup> Such stones are found when excavating Roman towns, and many blocks have been unearthened at Caerwent. Mr. Alfred E. Hudd, F.S.A., advances this theory as a probable solution of the problem.

<sup>3</sup> *Trans. B. and G. Arch. Soc.*, vol. v, p. 28.