

[Copied from a framed display in 1963 by Revd R Smith Vicar]

SOME NOTES ON THE FONT IN THE CHURCH OF ALL SAINTS' EAST MEON.

It is one of the group of seven Fonts known as the Winchester Group, the six others being in Winchester Cathedral, St. Michael's, Southampton, the Parish Church of St. Mary Bourne, Hants, Lincoln Minster, St. Peter's Ipswich, and in the Parish Church of Thornton Curtis in Lincolnshire; at least four other Fonts of the same kind are known to exist on the Continent, two being in Belgium, and two in Northern France. In the form and general outline of these Fonts there is scarcely any difference. The bowls are round on the inside and square on the outside, the bases are square like the bowls, and the stems are composed of five supporting columns of circular cross-sections. In all the Fonts of the Winchester Group the bowls and capitals of the supporting columns are formed out of one stone, and the nature of the stone, according authorities on stones, is not slate but black marble, and we are told that such a bed of stone is still being worked at Tourney in Hainault. It is a hard, close-grained stone, containing lime in it, and its colour is very nearly black with a bluish tinge about it.

The average outside diameter of the square bowls is 3 feet 6 inches, the East Meon Font measures two inches less. Both the architectural and ornamental features of all these Fonts have had great care lavished upon them, and the sculpture consists of figure subjects taken from Scripture and the lives of the Saints, of symbolical birds and beasts, and of conventional foliage.

The figure subjects on the northern and eastern sides of the East Meon Font are purely Scriptural; the scenes depicted are taken from the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, and are arranged from right to left, beginning on the north side side the creation of Adam and Eve.

Further Eastward on this north side we have the Temptation. The Tree of Life in the centre, with Eve on the right receiving the apple from the Serpent coiled round it, and Adam on the left, raising the apple to his mouth

On the East face is represented the Expulsion from Paradise and the Curse after the Fall. An Angel stands with a drawn sword in front of the gates of Paradise (which are conventionally treated as a Byzantine architectural structure), driving Adam and Eve before him, and in the next panel the Angel is showing Adam how to dig with a spade, whilst Eve is depicted with a distaff and spindle.

The minute care lavished by the Sculptor upon the details of the costumes, buildings, spinning and digging implements will amply repay a careful inspection of this remarkable Font.

On the Southern and Western faces of the Font we have a narrow freize of birds, beasts and mythical creatures above an arcade of round arches. The fleur-de-lys is also introduced. On the upper face of the Font round the basin, will be noticed a vine wreath with clusters of grapes and two pairs of birds drinking out of bowls.

Mr. J. Romilly Allen, F.S.A., Scotland, in discussing the mediaeval taste for decorating the most sacred portions of an ecclesiastical building with strange and grotesque creatures placed side by side with subjects taken from Scripture and

from the lives of the Saints, draws the inference that these grotesque creatures were intended to symbolise Christian truths of the deepest import, and he points out how little distinction was drawn between the symbolism founded on Scripture and that founded on the animal creation.

As regards the origin of our Font and those of the group to which it appears to belong, we have heard no theory more carefully advanced than that of Dean Kitchin, which appears in Vol. 1., March 1894, of the British Archaeological Association's Papers. He sums up his closely reasoned article by saying that everything points to Tournay in Hainault as being the birthplace of these Fonts, and in this he is supported by the evidence of Mr. Brindley, the expert in stones, and also by the conclusions of Mr. Romilly Allen.

As to the date, Dean Kitchin places it about the middle of the twelfth century, when the fame of St. Nicholas of Myra, whose miracles are depicted on the Winchester Font, had found its way to Northern Europe, and he advances able and scholarly evidence to show that our Font and the other three in our Diocese were most probably purchased by Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester 1129-1171, and presented by this generous lover of foreign Art to our Cathedral, to this Church and to the other two Hampshire Churches which they so greatly enrich.

September, 1912. T.H.M.

[Revd. Thomas Heywood Masters was Vicar of East Meon from 1902 – 1922.]