

THE FONT AT MONKS' SOHAM,
SUFFOLK.

BY CLAUDE MORLEY, F.E.S., F.Z.S.

The whole is octagonal, with very slight remains of original pale green painting. Basement two steps, each about nine inches in height; height of shaft twenty-four inches, of its figures fourteen and a half inches; and of the roses three and a-half inches square; height below bowl-canopy ten inches; width of panel, ten inches. On the shaft are four "monks," certainly representing the evangelists, alternating with their four symbols, each seated on a pedestal and each surmounted by a squared rose. The evangelists are all in full robes, and cowl over head and shoulders, with lost faces; the N.E. and S.E. ones have open book on knees; the N.W. a closed and hasped book on knee; the S.W. with (raised) book lost. On the E. is a winged Human Figure, which stands for Matthew, in cowl, cord and probably halo, holding in the left hand a scroll and pointing to a spot upon it with the right index finger; on the S. is the Lion of Mark with feline tail, hind legs, woolly chest, neck, and ears (head lost), and eagle's wings and fore legs; on the W. is a typical eagle, symbolising John, with lost head; and on the N. a winged Ox, with distinctly cleft hoofs and lost head, represents Luke. These are just as Carol Christie describes "The Three Maryners Tombes" at Walberswick Church in Ferryknoll, 1911:—

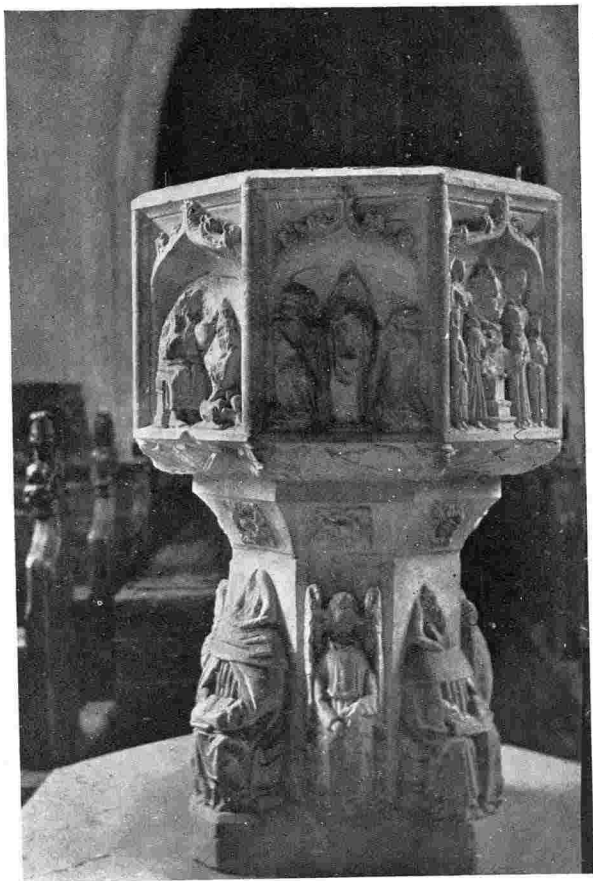
Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
At each corner of the stone,
In mystic Symbol orthodox,
Eagle, Lion, Man, and Ox."

Between each face of the bowl is a plain pillar and, on the chamfer below each pillar, a facially disfigured angel supporting the bowl with extended, overlapping wings. Each face of the bowl bears a panel, under a five-crocketed canopy with plain spandrels, representing in peculiarly bold and delicate sculpture the Crucifixion and the Seven Sacraments of the Roman Church, i.e., Baptism, the Supper of the Lord, Confirmation, Penance, Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction, as they are given by Evan Daniel on "The Prayer Book," ed. xii., p. 382; though the correct order is thus: 1, 3, 2, 4, 7, 5, 8.

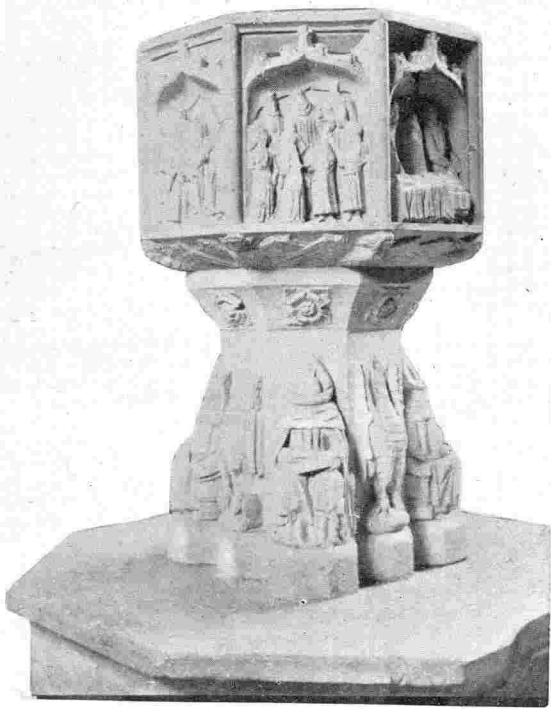
Dr. A. C. Fryer records only twenty-nine fonts bearing the Seven Sacraments in England—Norfolk sixteen, Suffolk eleven, Kent one and Somerset one—but his list (*Archæol. Journ.*, March, 1902, like that at p. 259 of Bond's 1908, "Fonts and Font Covers") is obviously incomplete. These beautiful panels may be thus described:—

(1) On the North-East, BAPTISM—Seven figures, and in the centre a font (exactly like this one, but with plain shaft and lost bowl); three figures supra almost lost, one appears to hold the book of ritual, "baptizo te in nomine Patris." Four figures infra; one an acolyte in short surplice, bearing a taper or chrismatory, two a monk in cowl and cord, holding above the font a nude infant—evidently a good deal older than the day after birth, at which juncture baptism was usual during that period—of which the back of legs and trunk are obvious, and whose head figure three supra seems to touch; three a female (the godmother) with hand on breast and perhaps holding the chrism-cloth dressed in collar and flowing gown to ground; four a male (the father) with robe to ankle.

(2) On the South-West, CONFIRMATION.—Four



EAST SIDE OF FONT.



WEST SIDE OF FONT.

Photo by Ernest A. Elliott, Esq.

figures, the outer short and inner tall ; one (the bishop) and two (priest) in cope to below the knee and alb of three folds ; three in obvious trunk-hose of five pleats to above knee only (upper half of all lost) ; four a female figure, complete except the folded hands and lost head, with gown to ground of seven folds, and, apparently, a veiled wimple ; two and three are in conjunction, as though two were confirming the (lost) child in three's arms ; all children were confirmed within three days of birth !

(3) On the East, which is its usual position as that nearest the altar, EUCHARIST.—Three figures, behind them an altar ; the central in (red) chasuble with no apparent orphrey, but elaborate (greenish) alb to ankle where the (golden) Apparel is distinct, standing on cushion, doubtless elevating the Host and (to judge from the position of the feet) facing inwards ; one and three kneeling and badly lost acolytes, neither touching chasuble but with one hand raised to breast in devotion.

(4) On the South-East, PENANCE.—Two figures ; the sinister a priest with lost head, sitting on carved and armless seat in alb to near ankle, whereof the square Apparel is there just traceable, the right hand on chest and the (lost) left raised in benediction to head of the mainly lost dexter shriven figure, kneeling upon a cushion.

(5) On the West, EXTREME UNCTION.—A figure, perhaps female, in ruff and nebule head-dress stretched upon a legged couch, with pleated coverlet turned back on the breast ; above, three figures whereof one and two are doubtless acolytes with respectively the casket of Unction and book of ritual, but now mainly lost ; three certainly a monk in alb and strong amice but no distinct stole, the thumb of whose right hand

applies the holy oil, in accordance with the Sarum Ritual, to the lost face on the couch, while the left with fingers downward in benediction is spread behind it; on the foot of the bed is an object, no doubt representing the dish containing the cotton for wiping the anointed eyes, ears, nose, feet, etc.

(6) On the North, ORDERS.—Four figures; one and four in amice and laterally-nicked robe, with pleated alb from knee to feet, which rest upon cushions; two, in dalmatic and chasuble, alb to feet and lost mitre, is blessing three, a drooping figure with deeply pleated dalmatic falling loosely upon a pedestal, its upper part lost and shoulders muffled in a voluminous cloak; two marks above seem to represent flagellation by one and four upon three, who is sustained by two, but are more likely to be the upper portion of the lost crozier and mitre. Actually, this is the least distinct sculpture remaining. Usually upon such fonts "the sacrament of Holy Orders" is portrayed by the ordination of either a deacon or a priest. The bishop, vested in alb, tunicle, dalmatic, chasuble and mitre, holding his crozier in his left hand, lays his right hand on the head of the kneeling candidate. If a subdeacon is being ordained a deacon he is vested in a dalmatic, but if a deacon is being raised to the priesthood he is robed in a chasuble. Several ecclesiastics accompany the bishop; one holds the open book, another the chrismatory, and another is doubtless intended to represent the archdeacon, whose duty it was to present the candidates for ordination, says Fryer, *loc. cit.* Nothing but the faces is figured in this panel at West Lynn in Norfolk.

(7) On the North-West, MARRIAGE. — Seven figures; supra three robed monks, the second in uncrossed stole joining with his right the hands of two central figures infra and his left raised in benediction;



NORTH-WEST SIDE OF FONT.

three holding breast-high the now lost book of ritual ; infra four figures, one and two females in flowing gowns to ground, one with a high and typical horned head-dress, two lost upwards from the knees ; three and four male figures with gown only to ankle, lost from waist upwards. The elevation in front of the last figure is doubtless his gypciere, purse ; the bridegroom's hands are lost, or he would hold the bride's with his left and place the ring upon it with his right.

(8) On the South, CRUCIFIXION.—A squared and unadorned cross on pedestal in centre, bearing a Figure lost excepting traces of arms and feet ; on either side a figure (the Virgin and Mary Magdalene), of which the upper halves are lost and the robes of the lower are very perfect to ground, showing no feet, though that on east discloses petticoat to knee. Said by Davy in 1828 (in errore ?) to face North.

The inside and edges of the bowl which is large enough for infant immersion are leaded, with a central water-hole draining to the ground beneath the church ; and an iron clip on both the north and south sides to receive the font-cover. This cover is lost ; various persons' memories place the loss at about 1870 ; Davy mentions it in 1828 as large ; and Rev. Henry Groome describes it to me as having been about four feet high, pyramidal, of old oak, pannelled, with a side door (as that still at Worlingworth, which is said at Proc. Instit. Arch., 1900, p. 379, to have been brought from Bury Abbey), but somewhat plain in ornamentation. In the surmounting tie-beam is a large hole, whence doubtless the hook to which this cover was attached once protruded. There was a time when these covers were invariably locked down upon the fonts, "as a protection against sorcery." Such sorcery seems to have originated in a habit mothers had of placing their infants, when suffering from con-

vulsions, croup, or whooping-cough in the church font, where they were persuaded a cure must be effected. Too often this led to fatal mishaps, due to suffocation or neglect. Consequently, Edmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, issued a Constitution in the year 1236 requiring every font to be covered and locked, which rule doubtless held good till after the Dissolution.

The horned head-dress of the bridesmaid resembles that of the 1467 Bernard brass at Isleham in Cambs. (olim Suffolk); it is exactly pictured in the central figure of Markham's History of France, 1859, p. 89, and there termed "Fifteenth Century." All the habiliments of the figures upon this font point to the latter half of that century; and its date is almost exactly fixed by the De la Pole and Lyhart heraldry, associated with identical evangelists, angels and other emblems, upon the Hoxne font, which is described in the East Anglian N. & Q., i., 1886, p. 329. All the English fonts bearing the Sacraments are said by Fryer to have been sculptured (probably under Flemish influence) between 1467 and 1544; that at Badingham has been dated circa 1485. So similar in every essential detail is our font to the Hoxne one, that no doubt can remain respecting their sculpture by the same artist; the latter bears the arms of Peter and Paul; of Bishop Lyhart of Norwich, 1446-1472; and those of John de la Pole, created second Duke of Norfolk in 1463 (cf. Suff. Arch. Inst. 1889, p. xxx.). Unlike the shield of the last at Wingfield, the one on Hoxne Font bears no sign of the Garter, of which he was made a Knight in 1472, the year Lyhart died at Hoxne. Hence no doubt can remain that these two fonts—those of Monks Soham and Hoxne—were erected certainly between the years 1463 and 1472; and very little doubt can be entertained that that at Monks Soham is the oldest Sacramental font in Britain, with a date 1465.

We owe it, I think, to the memory of Lawrence Cokkys, prebendary of Lichfield, who was instituted to the living here early in 1465 (teste Harwood's History of Lichfield, p. 240) to assert that pretty surely he introduced this pre-eminent font. "His parichens devoutly wolde he teche," and he became very popular among them, no doubt by his personal attentions through the time of the sudor anglicus, the terrible sweating sickness of 1485, if we may judge from the number of local children bearing his Christian name early in the next century.

It is remarkable that no adequate or even accurate description of this font has hitherto been published. Davy in 1828 thought its panels "seem to have been intended to represent the Sacraments; that on the N. (sic) face crucifixion"; but the Parkers in 1855 mistook them for "groups of figures representing scenes in the life of the Saviour," which statement is copied as lately as 1912 by Bryant. No nearer date than "Perpendicular Period" has hitherto been assigned it; indeed, we are most fortunate to have so exact evidence in the present instance; for, though post-Reformation and still more post-Restoration fonts, are occasionally dated, it is very rare to be able to fix a precise date to a pre-Reformation font. As Francis Bond points out in his 1908 "Fonts and Font Covers," p. 257, this can only be done in the case of a very few examples, such as those at Acle in Norfolk and Darsham in Suffolk, where armorial bearings or the name of a donor who is otherwise known enable a nearly exact date to be assigned. A parish like ours that can boast a Marian martyr ("Johnny Denny," cf. Wright's edition of Fox, p. 317) does not look to so late a time as Dowsing's holocaust for its iconoclasts; the disfigurement of our font is attributable to the Commission of 1552, and its sculptures are among the "graven images"

that Weaver, at p. 1, tells us were then battered down. Excellent photographs of every face were hung near the font a couple of years ago to assist in the study of its detail; and one of these (poorly reproduced) appeared in some "Parish Magazines" during June, 1917; this is its only extant picture.