

St Peter, St Mary Bourne

The Tournai Marble Font

20p

The font in this church is one of the seven (and a broken, lower half of another) in this country, four of which are in Hampshire. The other Hampshire fonts are in Winchester Cathedral; *St Michael's*, Southampton and *All Saints*, East Meon. There are some 49 others in northern France and Belgium. Although loosely described as "marble", they are in fact a dense black/blue schistous limestone of the carboniferous age, capable of being polished like marble. When first cut, the stone is relatively soft and easily worked. There are thin seams of the stone running from Boulogne to Aachen, and the fonts come from Tournai, near the French border, on the river Scheldt in Belgium. Tournai was a lively medieval town and it seems that font production flourished in the second half of the twelfth century. The fonts were quarried and carved in Tournai making them lighter to export by road and water. The Hampshire group was possibly imported by the then Bishop of Winchester, Henri de Blois (1129-1174) a notable art-lover. However, there is no strong link as yet shown between this Norman Bishop and St Mary Bourne, then merely a chapel of ease of Hurstbourne Priors.

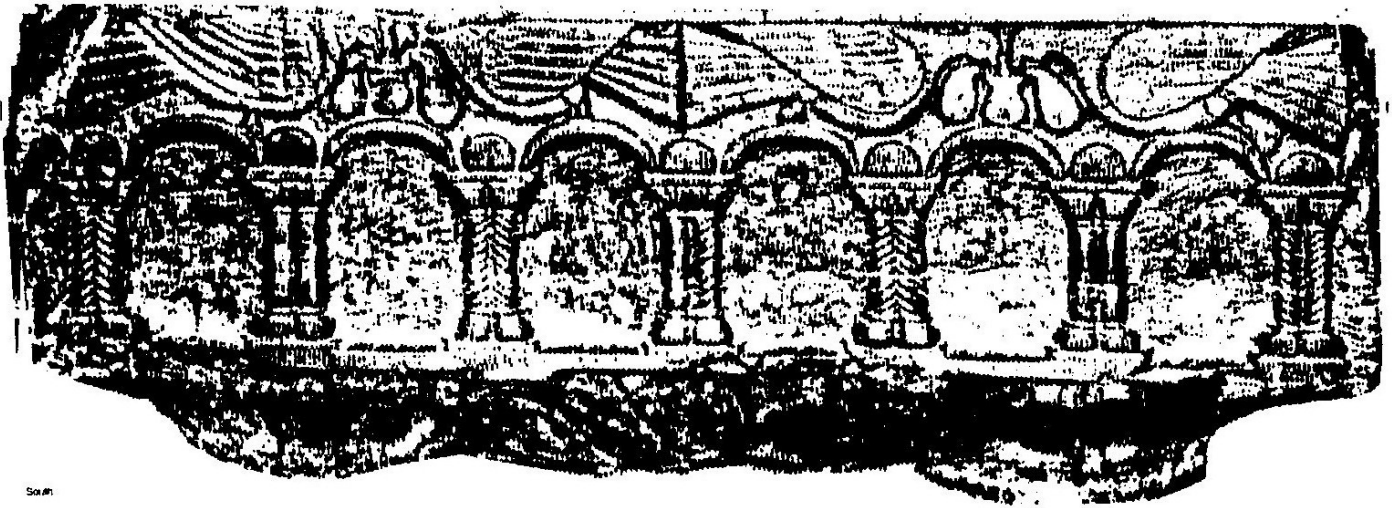
Tournai fonts typically stand a metre high on a thick central column with four separate thinner pillars at each corner. Surviving original bases (also square) often have masks or animal heads on the corners. The original base and pillars of this font are lost. Indeed, the font shows the marks of rough usage, especially on the north-west corner, and it is at least possible that it suffered the zeal of reformers, as did some other parts of the church. For many years the font stood on single sandstone pillar, now outside the church on the north side of the tower. The present base was commissioned from the Tournai quarries and brought over, not without incident, in 1927.

The carving on this font is relatively abstract and symbolic, certainly compared with the Winchester Cathedral font, which follows the story of St Nicholas: it lacks the allegorical beasts and figures of so many other Tournai fonts.

Description of the Font

West Side (facing the bell tower)

Six Norman arches and seven double pillars are surmounted by four doves in two symmetrical pairs (the souls of the faithful?), drinking thirstily out of two small cups, with what appear to be two large drops of water overflowing from them. This is apparently unusual for Norman carving and is symbolic of the living water, overflowing, abundant life (see John 4.14).



South

West side

North Side (facing the “Bank of England” window)

A further six Norman arches, with seven double pillars are decorated with seven fleur-de-lys. The flower symbolises purity and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Over the extreme left arch is a smaller plain and flat fleur-de-lys, the symbolic or artistic purpose of which is

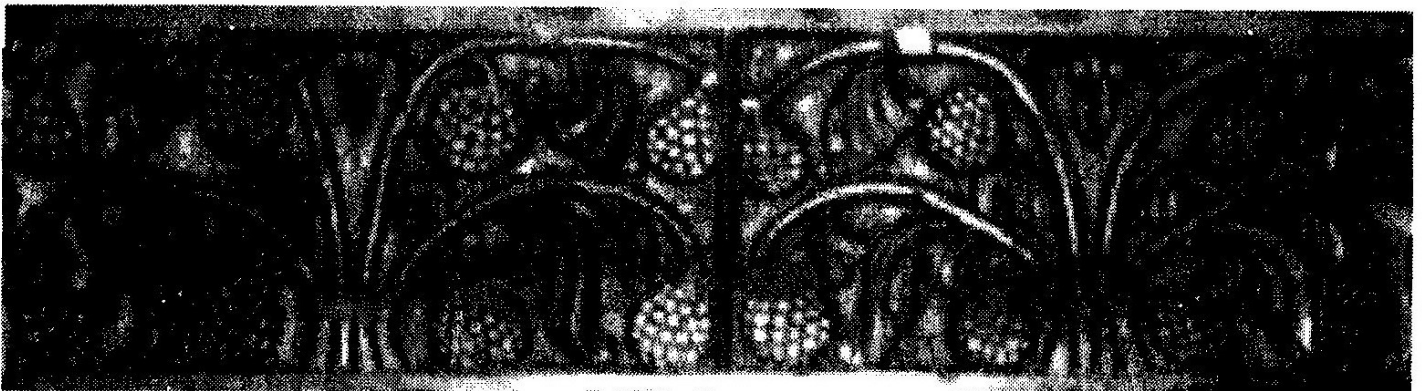


North side

opaque: it might possibly be a craftsman’s mark.

East Side (facing the High Altar)

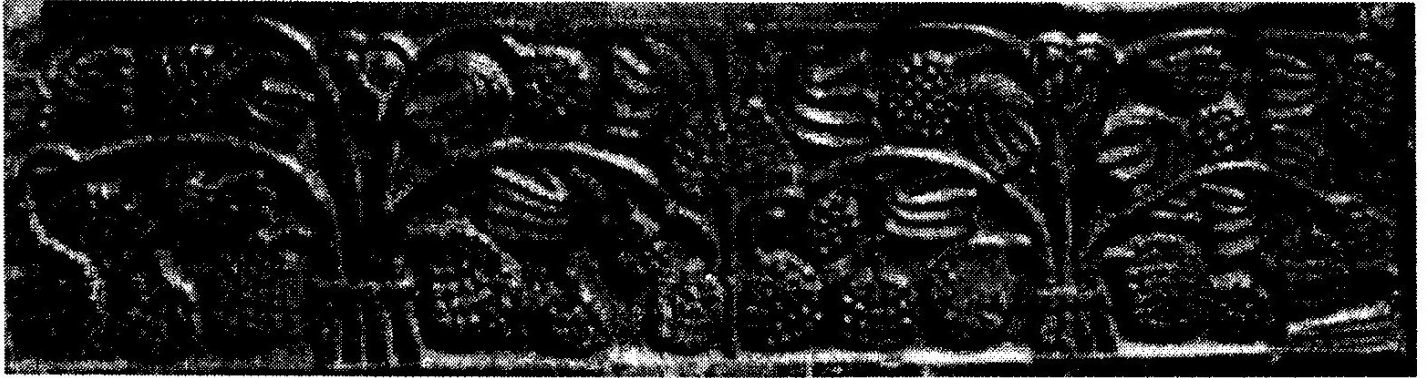
Two stylised vines on this side are less prolific in their fruiting than the final side, no doubt another symbolic touch, perhaps alluding to the pruning of the branches to bear greater fruit in John 15.2.



East side

South Side (facing the vestry and main door)

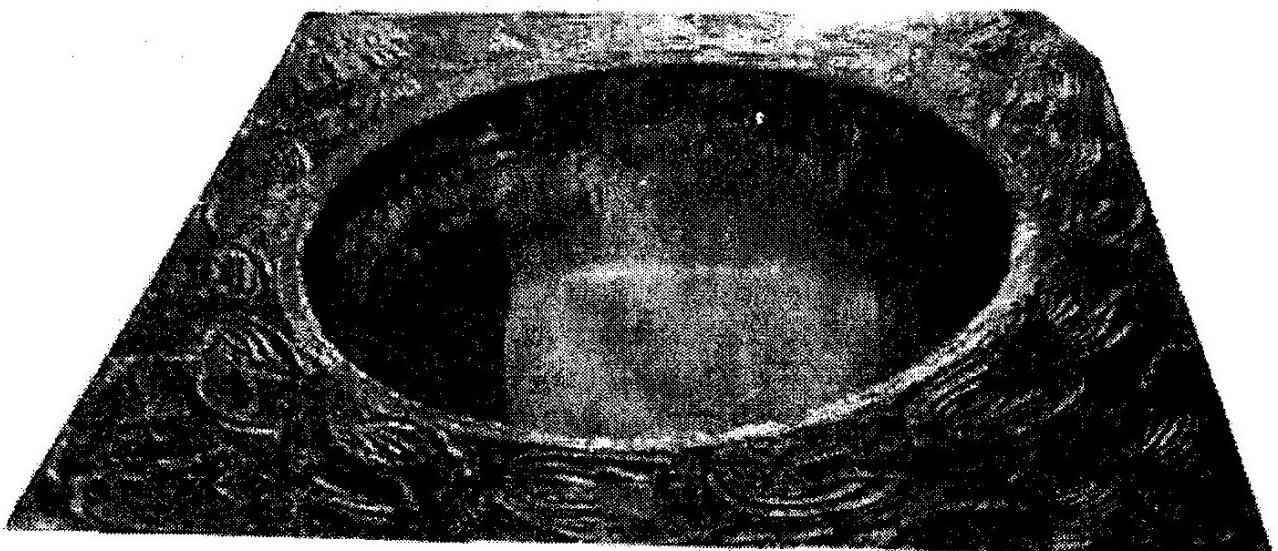
Two stylised vines, each with four tendrils, have bunches of grapes and conventional leaves hanging from them. The prolific fruiting recalls the words of Jesus in John 15.1-5, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Also the vine is a recurring metaphor in the Old Testament for the people of God (see Psalm 80.8-14; Isaiah 5.1 ff; Ezekiel 17.5-6; Hosea 10.1). The Tournai font in *St Pierre*, Montdidier in France has a very similar face, except that in between the two rather more compressed vines is an image of Christ blessing.



South side

The Top

A band of a scrolling vine branch and leaves surrounds the bowl of the font, binding the baptised into the people of God. The corners are filled with a pair of doves sipping from a vase (SE and NW) and a conventional wheat sheaf, bound at the stalk, with its head of grain above (NE). The SW corner has two symmetrical stems and leaves bound together with a tall cross between them, clasped by a design like an open metal bracelet (not a phoenix, as imagined by Dr Stevens!). All together, the reference is again to Holy Communion, this time to both bread and wine, and to the Holy Cross.



Comment

The artist, I believe, carefully chose the symbolism of the decoration to tell a story. Although the symbolism has been interpreted by others in a number of different ways, there is general agreement that the intention is to point beyond the font's role in the sacrament of infant baptism towards the mature Christian life.

This can be seen more clearly if we imagine the font realigned so that the cross on the top of the south-west corner faces along the length of the church towards the high altar. Anyone entering the church from the main, south entrance, would then see the two arcaded sides, the aisles of a church leading up to the high altar. The worshipper is reminded of Christ's offer of abundant life through the living water (the present west side) and of the need for purity (the fleur-de-lys of the north side) and the incarnation of Christ is alluded to through the Blessed Virgin Mary - also very appropriate in a village dedicated to her. The initiate thus passes through the waters of baptism and is bound into the people of God (the vine band around the bowl).

The depiction of the increasingly abundantly fruiting vines of the final two sides suggests the fruitful life in Christ entered through the ministry of the font itself, the cross being the guide to the spiritual life received in the Eucharist at the High Altar.

The artist, on this interpretation, therefore depicts images of growth and nourishment through Holy Communion and encourages spiritual maturity through the basic sacraments of the Church. Although execution of the carvings has been criticised as somewhat crude, the font in fact tells a subtle and symbolic story to those with the time and understanding to meditate upon it.

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Vicar of St Mary Bourne

July 1997 - Revised August 1999

Dimensions (metres)

The sides vary between 1.092 and 1.100. The diagonal (SW-NE) measures 1.540: the bowl's diameter is 0.808. The depth of the font is 0.410.

Bibliography

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C.S. Drake, 'The Distribution of Tournai Fonts' in *The Antiquaries Journal*, Vol. LXXIII, 1993, pp.11-26.

Notes of a lecture given by C.S. Drake in Southampton on 26th February 1995.