

FONT.

"In the Christian Church the Mass and Baptism are considered to be pre-eminent among the Seven Sacraments, baptism emphasising entry into the Christian life and the purging of sin. Consequently, every medieval church possessed its font which was symbolically located near the entrance, at the western end of the nave."¹

Although now correctly positioned in accordance with this mediaeval doctrine, this was not always the case: nor indeed is the present font particularly old. It was the gift of Miss Elizabeth Evans in memory of her sister, Miss Mary Anne Evans, of Burton Court, who died on 21st August 1850.²

At the time when the London Architect Henry Curzon drew up Plans for the proposed alterations to the church he drew up a "Plan in its present state/ A.D.1863" and also "Proposed Restoration", which is dated in his own hand "May 15.1864"

The former (1863 actual) shows the Font almost in the centre of the nave (slightly towards the south side) near the east end of the nave opposite the eastern extremity of the St Owen family tomb canopy.

The proposed position (May 15 1864) was to be at the far western extremity of the nave, indeed under and in the middle of the new arch to be inserted between the nave and the Bell Tower.

There is some doubt as to whether it was ever actually put there. There is record that, in 1919: *"Three pews on each side of the nave towards the chancel were removed. This portion of the nave and the central aisle were floored with artificial stone slabs, and the pulpit and font were moved a few feet forward . Thus the church achieved its present dignified appearance."*³

To me this wording suggests that both Font and Pulpit were in the same part of the church ie. the east end of the nave. A photograph dated "about 1900" looking towards the altar from well back in the nave is unclear,⁴ but the second photograph on the same page is clear - no font near the east of the nave. But this second photograph is undated, captioned "...*Photograph of Chancel after Restoration.*" Not dated it may be, but it clearly shows electric lights in the nave. Electricity was not installed in the church until 1931.⁵ It seems possible/likely that the font was not moved to the back of the church, to its present position, until between c.1900 and 1931 and that it never stood where the Architect, Curzon, intended.

The font cover was the gift of the Reverend Birley, Vicar of Eardisland from 1917 to 1938, at Michaelmas 1936.

¹ Friar, S. "A Companion to the English Parish Church". Chancellor Press. AD.2000.

² Birley. "Records Book".

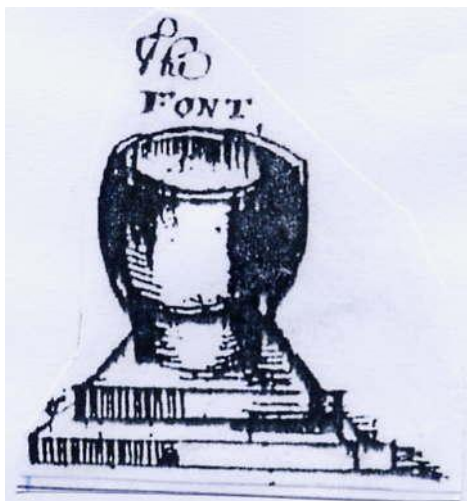
³ Reeves, N in 'Leon Valley...' at page 138.

⁴ WI Book, 'facing page 73'.

⁵ WI Book, page 74.

But what of the font which the present one replaced? The church itself is ancient.⁶ And the font would have been one of the more cherished attributes of the church over the centuries.

Dating to circa 1683 are drawings of the church⁷, which include one of the font, which I show hereunder:



What became of it?

A previous Vicar of Eardisland, the Reverend Birley,⁸ mentioned in his “Record Book”: *“There is no record of what became of the old Font, but there is a drawing..”* and he goes on to mention the Dingley drawing shown above. Elsewhere in his “Record Book” Birley rather contradicts himself by saying: *“The bowl of the ancient font now stands in a cottager’s garden.”*

Wherever it was in Birley’s time a case can be made to support my suggesting that the font drawn by Dingley still exists and is in the porch at Burton Court.

It will be remembered from near the start of this Paper that the present font was the gift of Miss Elizabeth Evans of Burton Court circa 1850; but I do not suggest that it was she who had the old font moved to Burton Court.

Indeed, unless the Reverend Birley was intentionally misleading or mis-informed when he said “now stands in a cottager’s garden”, the old font at Burton Court (if such it is) did not arrive there until after 1916; before 1939. This points to the Clowes family being responsible. After the death of their only son in the First World War (March 30th 1918) both Colonel and Mrs Clowes of Burton Court can be shown to have had a considerable interest in the history of the Manor of Burton , and impliedly of Eardisland and the church building. Colonel Clowes’ father, John Clowes, had been very involved in the ‘restoration’ of the church in 1863-1865, to which he contributed very substantial monies. One of the main tasks carried out was the removal of the ancient chancel arch and its replacement with the present one. The point of mentioning this in a Paper about the Font is to also bring into the discussion the other stone artefact in the porch at Burton Court.

⁶ The nave dates to the late 11th century but there is documentary evidence of a church here well before then.

⁷ Dingley, Thomas “History from Marble”, circa 1683, page 160. Reprinted by the Camden Society in 1867.

⁸ P.A.H.Birley, Vicar 1917-1938.

To quote from the 1965 Burton Court Exhibition brochure insert:

“Either side of the front door is a stone ornament found in the garden.⁹ On the right is a font, probably mediaeval, and on the left the base and capital from a column, Early English.”

Some years ago¹⁰ the Simpson family at Burton Court agreed that I may photograph the two artefacts, with these results:



If font it is, it may well have come from Eardisland church and only a little imagination is needed to say that it is quite similar to the one shown in the Dingley drawing.

⁹ Hardly a “cottager’s garden” if from the garden at Burton Court. But the Reverend Birley may have been being discreet, if not completely truthful, or it may have reached Burton Court after the Reverend Birley’s time.

¹⁰ On 24th June 2001.

As for the “*base and capital from a column*”, close scrutiny shows carved faces which have a striking resemblance to those which can still be seen on the outside of the easternmost window in the north wall of the nave of the church:



It is tempting to think that the capital and base may have come from the Chancel Arch which was inserted in the then east wall of the church when the chancel was built in the early 14th century. Whilst heavily ‘restored’, this window appears to date to the same period.

My date ‘early 14th century’ for the building of the chancel is based on what is printed in RCHM¹¹ Volume 3 at page 45 of *early to mid 14th-century date* slightly changed to take account of what may be implied by the Local History of the period. This is supported by what Reeves says on pages 141-142 of his *Leon Valley*.¹² where he suggests that it was probably Walter de Mortimer, who followed Richard de Wyre as vicar in 1317, who *initiated the considerable extensions which were made in about this period. As a Mortimer he, no doubt, had ample means.*

But two quite recent expert opinions suggest that the masonry in the porch at Burton Court, and the chancel itself, may be even earlier.

On 2nd March 2004, at a visit of a “Buildings Expert” to Burton Court, he considered that the masonry artefacts in the porch dated to *say 1280-1290* and, much more recently (2011) a professional archaeologist, specialist in church buildings, examined the base of the buttress on the SE corner of the chancel of our church and satisfied himself that it was the same age as the chancel itself. When I said that I understood that the chancel dated to about 1330, he said that on the evidence of the foundations of the buttress and from what he had seen of the rest of it, he considered that the chancel dated rather earlier than I had suggested.

However they came to be at Burton Court, and whether or not my suggested identification of them is correct, it is good that these two artefacts are there, in safe hands for the future.

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¹¹ *Royal Commission on Historic Monuments. Herefordshire.* HMSO 1934.

¹² Reeves N.C. *The Leon Valley. Three Herefordshire Villages. Kingsland, Monkland & Eardisland.* Phillimore & co. Ltd. 1980