



FONT IN CHURCH OF ST. CHAD, HOLT  
THE EASTERN SIDES

## THE HERALDRY OF THE FONT AT HOLT

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THE very remarkable font in the church of St. Chad, at Holt in Denbighshire, is one of those examples of ecclesiastical furniture that we find not infrequently in our land, whose decoration tells, for those with eyes to read it, the tale of the great ones who in times past ruled the country-side.

It is an octagonal structure, with panelled bowl and stem, having under the bowl a chamfer that is also octagonal but not panelled. Each one of its twenty-four surfaces is occupied by carving of remarkable vigour and effectiveness, but executed in the rudest fashion.

The head of the font is cut down. It has lost its upper moulded edge, which evidently was split at some time by one of the staples through which was passed the bar that secured the cover; and it will be noticed<sup>1</sup> that the damage extended to the upper part of the eastern panel of the bowl.

The eastern side of the font is adorned with these carvings:—On the bowl is a shield of England with a helm above it crested with a sitting leopard. The helm has on the right side of it an ostrich feather erect, behind a small scutcheon carved with a bear and ragged staff; and on the left is an uncharged shield with a similar feather behind it. On the

<sup>1</sup> See illustration.

chamfer is a leopard ; and on the stem a demi-angel holding a small plain shield.

On the north-east side of the bowl panel is a shield of Beauchamp (with six crosslets but without the fesse), quartered with Newburgh (checky but lacking the ermine cheveron), Nevill of Salisbury (a saltire but without the gobony label), and Clare (three cheverons). On the chamfer is a much broken emblem that, without doubt, is a fetterlock ; and on the stem is an ornament of leaves.

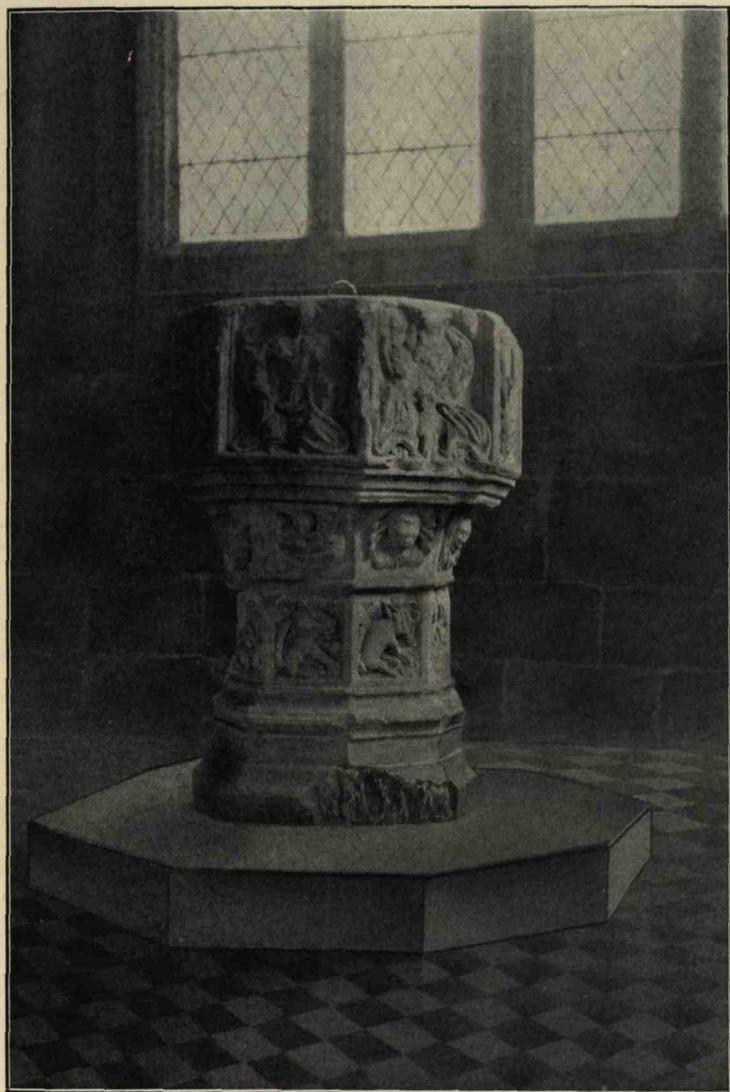
On the north side the carvings are as follows :— On the bowl is a battered design that seems to have represented Our Lady with the Child on her right knee ; on the chamfer are three human figures in a vessel that has somewhat the appearance of a boat ; on the stem is a sitting dog with a collar about his neck.

On the north-west face we find on the bowl another greatly damaged carving in which, however, it is not difficult to trace a representation of the Holy Trinity ; on the chamfer is a human bust with flowing hair ; and on the stem is a boar.

On the western side the bowl panel is occupied by a hart's head cabossed ; on the chamfer is a grotesque face ; and on the stem is a chipped and defaced seated figure holding in his right hand an object that looks like a bishop's crozier. This is, perhaps, a representation of St. Chad, the patron saint of the church.

On the south-west side are these objects :— On the bowl a lion rampant, the rest of the panel being filled with coarsely cut foliage ; on the chamfer a leaf ornament ; on the stem a quatrefoil in a circle with a rose in the centre of it.

On the south face the bowl panel is carved with the checkered shield of Warrene ; the chamfer has a leopard ; and on the stem is a finely designed ornament of vine leaves.



THE NORTH AND NORTH-WEST FACES

On the south-east face the carvings are :—On the bowl a shield of the Fitzalan lion quartered with Warenne's checkers ; on the chamfer a demi-angel holding a blank shield ; on the stem a leaf ornament.

But a mere catalogue of its wealth of imagery cannot exhaust the interest of this astonishing piece of work. It is the simple directness, the childish strength, the extraordinary effectiveness of its execution that hold you amazed. For here is work of the twilight of the Gothic art. Within a very few years of its making all that it represents was to be scorched and shrivelled up in the ardent rays of the sun of the Renaissance ; and yet it looks in its rugged strength as if it might be four hundred years older than we know it to be.

On the other hand, it is a fair argument that the crudeness of the carving is merely evidence of decadence, of the slackness of an effete time in which men would not be at the pains to work as well as they could. And yet when all is said you wonder again that work that is really so bad should appear to be so good, and that, in spite of its coarse clumsiness, it can succeed in being so decorative and in telling its tale so bravely.

For our present purpose we may disregard the figures human and divine, as well as the leaves, the faces, and the quatrefoil ; but before considering the heraldry we must glance at the boat-like vessel containing three men, carved on the chamfer on the north side.

This is, of course, a reference to St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, and represents the three youths in a tub who make the familiar emblem of the patron saint of children. Its peculiar appropriateness as part of the decoration of a font will be readily recognised. Other fonts on which it occurs are no doubt well known to our readers, the most notable, perhaps, being that in Winchester Cathedral.

The heraldic carvings will be enumerated and described in the following order, for a reason that will presently be seen :—

(1) The shield of Warenne on the south face of the bowl.

(2) The shield of Fitzalan on the south-east face of the bowl.

(3) The rampant lion in the south-west panel of the bowl, which we take to be the white lion of Mowbray.

(4) The royal badge of the ostrich feather that appears twice in the eastern panel of the bowl.

(5) The boar on the north-west side of the stem, which is a badge of Richard Crookback.

(6) The fetterlock on the north-east chamfer, a well-known badge of the house of York.

(7) The shield and crest of the king of England in the eastern panel of the bowl, which, taken in conjunction with much of the other heraldry, obviously refer to King Richard III.

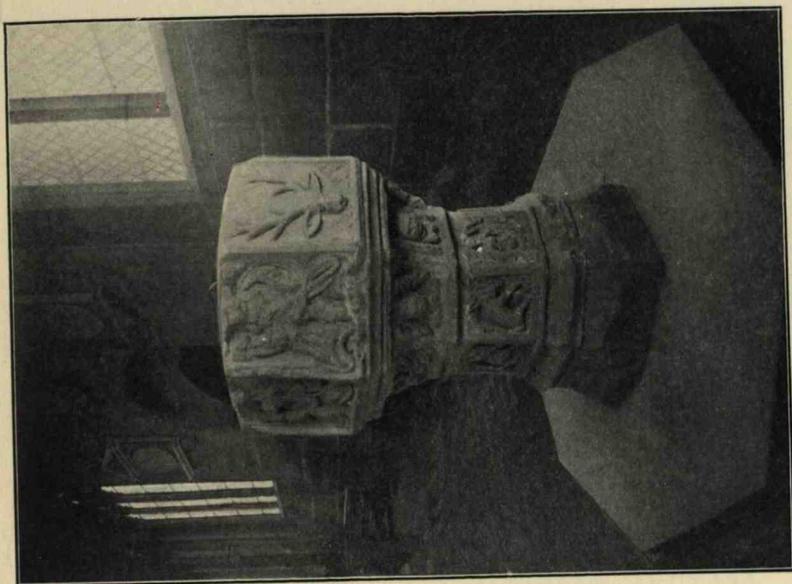
(8) The royal leopards on the south and east chamfers.

(9) The quartered shield of Beauchamp, Newburgh, Nevill, and Clare on the north-east side of the bowl, a variant of the arms of Richard Nevill, Earl of Warwick, whom history knows as the King-maker.

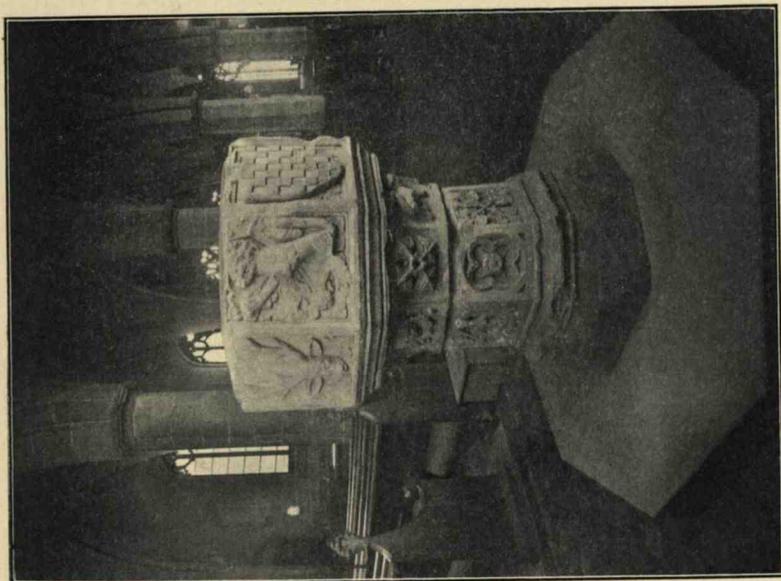
(10) The little scutcheon with the bear and ragged staff by the side of the king's arms in the east panel of the bowl, which is the famous badge of the earls of Warwick.

(11) The hart's head in the west panel of the bowl, which has obvious reference to the house of Stanley.

(12) The collared hound sitting in the north panel of the stem, which is none other than the greyhound badge of King Henry VII.



THE NORTH-WEST AND WEST FACES



THE WEST, SOUTH-WEST, AND SOUTH FACES

Taking these devices now in the order in which they are here set down, and comparing them with the history of Holt, their significance becomes clear. The lordship of Bromfield and Yale, with Holt Castle as its *caput*, was held in Norman times by the Warennes (1)<sup>1</sup>, and afterwards came into the hands of the Fitzalans. Thomas, seventh of the Fitzalan Earls of Arundel (2), dying without issue in 1415, the lordship passed to his sisters or their heirs male in right of them, and was parted among the Mowbrays of Norfolk, the Nevills and the Lenthalls. The Lenthalls soon lost their third, and the lordship was held in undivided moieties by Mowbray (3) and Nevill. In 1474 Richard (4), Duke of Gloucester (5), fourth son of Richard, Duke of York (6), and afterwards King of England as Richard III. (7 and 8), married the Lady Anne, second daughter and co-heir of Richard Nevill (9), Earl of Warwick (10). After King Richard's death, Sir William Stanley (11), second son of Thomas, first Lord Stanley, became lord of Holt by favour of King Henry VII. (12), and held the castle at the time when the church assumed its present appearance. It is said that he was the richest subject of King Henry, having no less than 40,000 marks in hard cash and a rent-roll of £3000 a year. And it would seem that in the end his great wealth was his undoing, for when in 1495 Perkin Warbeck was meditating his first attempt on the crown of England, Henry professed to believe that Stanley had turned against him, and had him beheaded for a traitor. But men said it was because the lord of Holt was so rich that the king envied him, and that the nearest way to get his riches was to take his head.

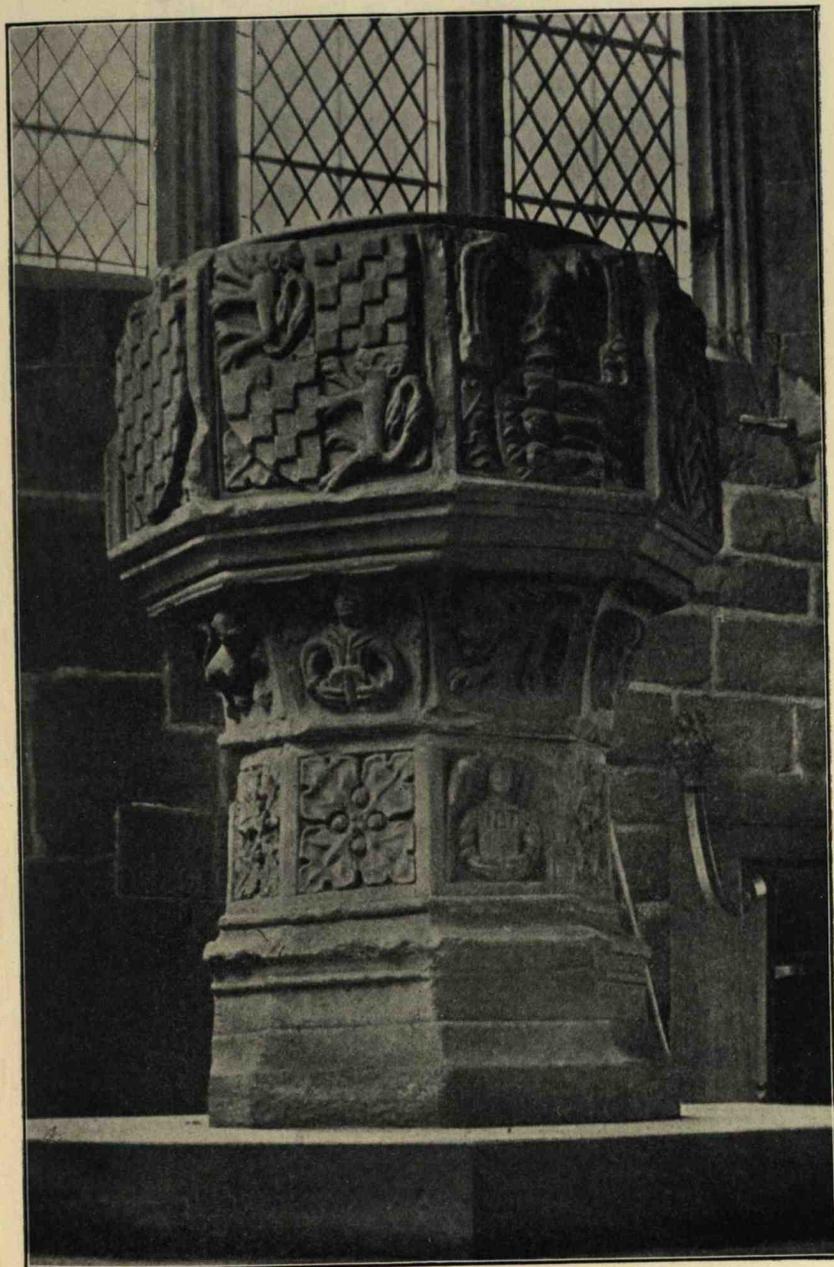
However that may be, that date, 1495, gives us

<sup>1</sup> This and the following numerals in brackets refer to the order in which the heraldic devices are numbered above.

the latest year that is possible for the making of the font. It cannot have been made before 1485, or the greyhound badge of the Tudor would not have been carved upon it, and after Stanley's beheading it would have been hard to find in all England one bold enough to place upon it a memorial of a declared traitor.

Internal evidence, then, gives us the decade within which the font must have been made. Perhaps from other sources, unknown to the present writer, the actual year may be ascertainable. The interest of this little investigation lies in the fact, of which this example affords one more proof, that heraldic decoration may nearly always be trusted as evidence not only of personality but of dates as well. For, as we have tried to show, the heraldry of this font is the history of Holt in shorthand. It shows the descent of the lordship from the Warennes, through Fitzalan, Mowbray, and Nevill; it marks the alliance of the heiress of Nevill with the blood royal, and brings the history of Holt to the day of the making of the font when the lordship had come into the hands of a Stanley.

Of all the armory that goes to the telling of this story the most remarkable piece is the rude but unmistakable shield of the King-maker that decorates the north-eastern panel of the bowl. Among the many armorial achievements that have been displayed for that many-landed earl not one is known to the present writer that so entirely flouts those conventions which the pedants came to regard as essential to the marshalling of arms. There is scarcely one that more concisely emphasises the truth that the great folks of the heraldic time regarded their quarterings less as marks of identity and evidences of descent than as emblems of their high seignories. Richard "Make-a-king" is before all else earl of Warwick, and the arms that we call



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those of Beauchamp and Newburgh—holders of that historic earldom long before the Nevills had come out of their northern fastnesses—are put first in his scutcheon, not for a sign that the blood of the old earls of Warwick runs in the veins of Richard Nevill, still less as symbols of his marriage with their heiress, but to proclaim that he is holder of titles and broad lands that they once had held. He is also earl of Salisbury, and the herald of the font (though he omits the label that is the distinguishing mark of Nevills who held that earldom) puts the saltire next, because his earldom of Salisbury, inherited from his father, is of less renown than the great lordship of the midland country that his wife had brought him. Last come the cheverons of Clare. Not that even so high a personage as my lord of Warwick dares to lay claim to the exalted dignity of Gloucester. But he is lord of Glamorgan and Morgan and warden of the western marches, as the Clares had been, and he displays as a symbol of that territorial dignity the arms that they had borne, while he separates them from the ensigns of Beauchamp and Newburgh, to which, if quarterings denoted nothing but blood relationship, they should have been closely united.

It was in another and not less remarkable shield of the King-maker that Mr. Horace Round<sup>1</sup> marked "the designer feeling his way . . . towards a system of quartering." Here at Holt, if we have read aright the intentions of him who designed the font, we may note the same thing, and see in what measure within the limits that he assigned to himself he achieved success.

The thanks of the Society are due to Mr. John Gilbert, Dr. Larkin, Dr. Bailey, and Mr. Arkle for

<sup>1</sup> *Ancestor*, iv. 145.

photographs of the font; without these pictures Mr. Dorling's valuable paper could not have been written. Thanks are likewise due to Mr. Alfred Neobard Palmer for the notes which he kindly supplied relating to the history of Holt.—EDITOR.