

Kirklevington Font

The old font at Kirklevington, which now stands beside the pulpit at the north-east corner of the nave, is an odd composite piece formed by the putting together of a disparate bowl, shaft and base; it was brought into the church from the churchyard in the later 20th century

The bowl is hexagonal, measuring 700mm at its greatest diameter, 130mm deep internally and 390 mm high in all; in section it has a vertical upper face with a slight convex inward-slope below, then a convex ring or knop at the base, producing an overall cup- or chalice-like form. It is formed of medium-grained buff sandstone, probably relatively local, and is in reasonable condition, although one angle is broken away. There are considerable remains of white plaster or whitewash.

The Victoria County History considers the bowl as ‘probably not older than the 17th century’ and this seems quite likely. Whilst its overall form is broadly late medieval, three features make it atypical of genuine medieval fonts.

- (1) The hexagonal, rather than the more common octagonal form. There is a tradition that the earliest fonts were hexagonal, symbolic of the six days of Creation, but later it appears that the octagonal form became normative; the symbolism, is here said to be that of the seven days of the week with the added eighth day of Christ’s Resurrection.
- (2) The absence of any evidence of fittings, or provision for a locked cover. In the medieval period there was concern over the theft of holy water from fonts, either for use in occultic rituals, or even sometimes as a supposedly curative drink. One of the criteria for the identification of a font as medieval is said to be evidence that it had a lockable cover.
- (3) The rather shallow scooped bowl;’ most medieval fonts were deep enough for the immersion of an infant.

Many fonts were removed or broken in the Civil War period, and re-instated afterwards (dated examples in the 1660s are relatively common), although these are often of a more obviously post-medieval form.

The shaft is of a yellower sandstone, c 370mm square and 345 mm high; it is badly worn, but its original form is clear; there has been a broad chamfer with a raised band of dog-tooth ornament at each angle. The best-preserved ornament is at what is now the north-east (and least accessible) corner; the southern angles are more or less weathered out of all recognition. There is also a vertical groove in the north face that is almost certainly secondary and of unknown purpose. Dog-tooth ornament is very characteristic of the 13th century (‘Early English’) style and can be regarded as virtually-irrefutable dating evidence. It never occurs before c1200, and its use in the context of stylistic revival is unlikely (although not unknown) before the 19th century; the degree of weathering makes it clear that it is of some antiquity. Its form suggests that it is part of a the shaft of a fairly substantial cross, which perhaps stood in the churchyard. The top of the shaft (now concealed by the bowl) is scooped out into a

shallow bowl itself, just conceivably through re-use as a stoup or some similar ecclesiastical feature, or perhaps simply as a mortar in a secular setting.

The base, a block of orange/brown sandstone 490 by 430 mm by 190 mm thick, simply appears to be a roughly-cut rectangular block of stone; it might conceivably be part of a grave cover, but in its present setting any design that might survive is concealed by the shaft resting on it. It is almost certainly an entirely unrelated block pressed into service at the font's last move.

When the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries visited the church at the end of the 19th century, they commented 'the bowl of an ancient font is in the churchyard supported by a shaft of earlier date, which does not belong to it, the shaft being decorated at the angles with dog-tooth ornament' (Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle IX (1901), p.250). In 1835 the visiting Bishop of Ohio stated that 'the baptismal font made of a block of stone as thick and half as high as myself and evidently hewn in the time of the Saxon sway'. If indeed he was referring to the same font as exists today, an integral shaft may have been subsequently been cut away and lost; at this time the use of the term 'Saxon' simply meant 'archaic'. He may have been referring to a different font; whilst the Society of Antiquaries comments make it clear that by c1900 the present font bowl and shaft were in the churchyard, Mrs Wright of Kirk school has stated that 'the old font' was at one time positioned at the Picton Lane end, at the entrance into the Parish (pers. comm. Ros Butler)

Peter F Ryder May 2008