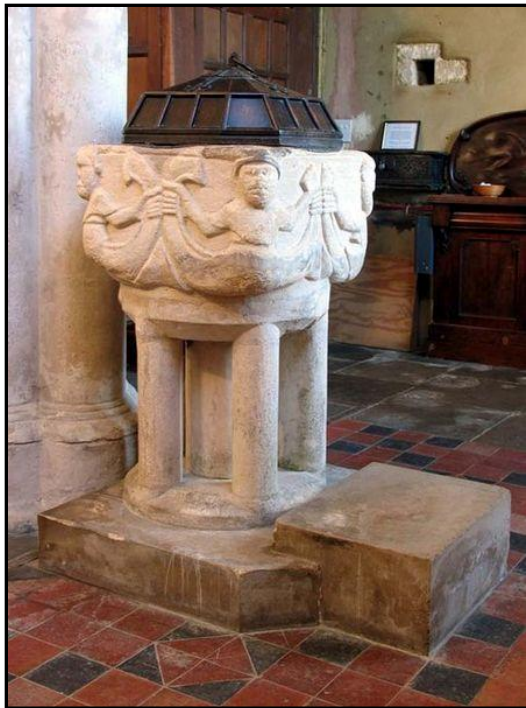


Amazing Finds - Baptismal Fonts

Church Recorders have now recorded nearly 1800 churches, all with a baptismal font of some sort and probably no two alike. That is an amazing thought in itself! Baptism has always been the first rite of passage for a new member of the Church, a ceremony held near the entrance to the church building combining symbolic spiritual cleansing with a welcome into the family of the Church. It is a time for serious commitments as well as for rejoicing and the font, usually set on a plinth and often made of elaborately carved stone, reflects the importance of the occasion.

Water has always represented a spiritual power in most religions and certainly in pre-Christian times in the UK holy wells and sacred springs were the place for religious ceremonies and often became the site chosen for a church. Water was seen to be the soul to the earth's body, bestowing love on humans and allowing crops to grow. This tradition remained deeply engrained in folklore and is incorporated into the carving on fonts into the 12th century. This twin-tailed merman or melusine found at the Church of St Mary, Anstey, Hertfordshire is just such an example, while the mystery figure seen at St Peter, Thorpe Salvin, South Yorkshire with the zig-zags leading to perhaps the mouths of fishes must surely be another water spirit.



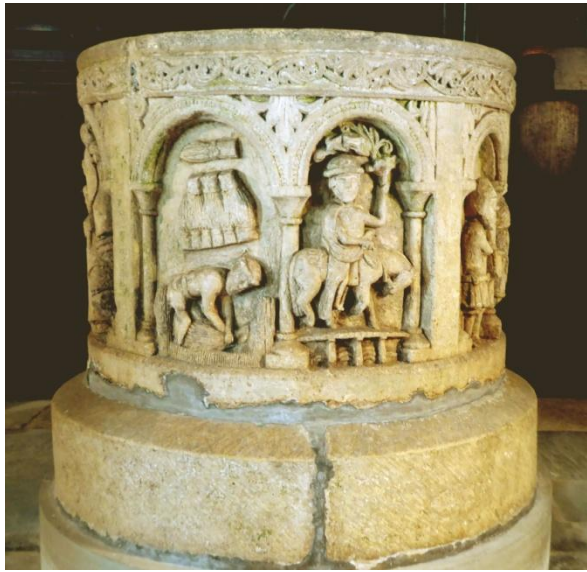
St Mary, Anstey, Herts



St Peter, Thorpe Salvin, S Yorks

The other six facets of the font at Thorpe Salvin are a complete contrast being delicately carved in great detail and showing rustic scenes. Four of the panels feature the four seasons which is an unusual theme for a font. One shows a man scattering seed, the next a man on horseback rides across a bridge, then a reaper making a sheaf of corn, and on the last a warmly dressed man warming his feet in front of a fire. The last two panels feature a baptism. On the left a

priest holds a tiny naked child over the font while, on the right, four grandly dressed people are watching the proceedings.



St Peter, Thorpe Salvin, Spring & Summer



St Peter, Thorpe Salvin, The Baptism

In complete contrast, but also in Hertfordshire, the Church Recorders found themselves in St Mary, Essendon with a treasure of the late 18th century - a black basalt jasperware font made by Josiah Wedgwood (1730-95), one of only five ever made. Samuel Whitbread (1720-96), the founder of the brewery and a great friend of Josiah Wedgwood, went to live in Essendon in 1765 and ten years later, when the church was completely rebuilt, his step-daughter Mary presented the Wedgwood font. Five years later, her half sister Harriot (sic) gave an almost identical font to the neighbouring church at Cardington. As the font was too large to hold the water for a baptism, a matching pedestal was made to stand inside the bowl, on top of which is placed a small silver dish to hold the water.

A hundred years later the church was again rebuilt and a local man who had emigrated to Australia asked if he could have the Wedgwood font which was no longer used in Essendon for his new local church. However no agreement was reached as to who would pay the freight so the font is still in the church here. The other three fonts are in museums, one at the Lady Lever Gallery, one in the Wedgwood Museum in Barlaston and one in the Wedgwood Museum in Pennsylvania.



St Mary, Essendon, Herts

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