



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about CHURCH FONTS

Most parish churches have a font, usually near the entrance. Fonts hold holy water which is used to 'baptise' people, an initiation into the Christian faith. They are often situated near the church entrance to symbolise, by baptism, a person's entry into the family of the church. The word font is derived from the Latin for a spring or fountain.

The fonts in our local churches have a variety of designs. They are usually made of stone and can be anything up to a thousand years old. This article describes and depicts a selection of those to be found in The Hundred Parishes.

This first photo is of Finchingfield Church, where the font is prominently positioned in the nave. Its basin sits in an octagonal surround which is decorated with leafy patterns and shields. A high proportion of fonts are octagonal - with eight sides.



Most fonts have a circular bowl, supported on a variety of pedestals. Some are relatively plain, others richly decorated. Some have a cover, often ornate and sometimes with a pulley mechanism to lift it.

St. George's church in Anstey, Hertfordshire, has what may be the oldest font in the Hundred Parishes. It is made of stone and believed to date from the 11th century. It is also rare in that it is decorated with mermen (the male equivalent of mythical mermaids) holding their tails.



Whilst highly unusual, Anstey's mermen-decorated font is not unique: there is another of similar vintage in the city of Cambridge, in St Peter's Church, Castle Hill, CB3 0AQ.

Thorley's St. James the Great church has a 12th-century font. Long ago, it was removed from the church and for many years it was used as a drinking trough on a nearby farm. It was discovered and reintroduced into the church in 1855.



The ornate cover was designed by George Gilbert Scott, a prolific architect known mainly for his work designing and renovating churches and cathedrals. He also designed workhouses and the Albert Memorial in Hyde Park.



Pictured on the left is the octagonal font in Debden's St. Mary the Virgin and All Saints church.

It dates from 1786 and was designed by Richard Holland. It is made of Coade stone, a hard-wearing manufactured material sold by a lady called Eleanor Coade.

The rich decoration includes roses and the heraldry of Richard Muilman Chiswell who inherited the Debden estate and undertook much of the renovation of the church.

Debden's font has an ornate cover which dates from the same time. It is raised and lowered on a pulley system.



Pictured below on the left is the 13th-century font from Standon's parish church. Below on the right is another octagonal design in Matching church.



Shown below are two 14th-century fonts – the one on the left is in Hempstead church and the one on the right is at Felsted.



Two octagonal fonts are pictured below: the one on the left is in Hatfield Broad Oak and dates from 1897; the one on the right is at Wimbish and was installed in 1881.



Those below are much older: on the left, 15th-century at Castle Camps and on the right 14th-century at Chickney - its bowl is lavishly decorated including shields bearing the coats of arms of the families of Braybrook and Fitzwalter. The wooden font cover was added in 1858 and has roses and fleurs-de-lys carved in its panels.





The square font shown on the left can be found in Barley church; it dates from the 19th century.



Tilty's Cistercian Abbey had a separate chapel for use by visitors. That is almost all that remains of the abbey today and it now functions as Tilty's parish church, dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin.

Its circular font has a cover which was elaborately painted in the 20th century by the Marquis d' Oisy. He was born Ambrose Thomas, took various aliases and worked as an artist. He worked at Thaxted for Conrad Noel.

This is just a sample of local fonts – there are many more to be found, photographed and researched.

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