

## **EDITORS' NOTE**

### **Tournai fonts in England**

The important group of Tournai fonts that can be found in the south and east of England are described below. While several went to parish churches for the benefit of their parishioners, within this group is that of Winchester Cathedral, a rather incongruous setting for a baptismal font, being a male Benedictine monastery. This font, however, was destined to only perform its function for the elite births in the area, especially that of the Norman palace, built by William the Conqueror, immediately next door to the Cathedral.

Little trace of this palace site remains, beyond fragments in the wall opposite St Lawrence's church, itself the original chapel of this palace, and masonry in the rear wall of the chocolate shop in the Pentice. At the time of the font's arrival, the palace was an important part of the royal estate until its destruction in the Anarchy or Civil War between Stephen and Matilda between 1135 and 1154. This explains its location and function at this time, although few if any royal births were recorded in this first palace, but Henry III was born at the top of the hill in the castle in 1206.

The font is therefore likely to have been used for his baptism, along with that of Prince Arthur, eldest son of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, born in Winchester in 1486. While the monks might not have needed the font for their own purposes, the font was important for royal and elite baptisms, always undertaken in the first 24-48 hours of life.



Winchester Cathedral's restored Tournai font (Photo: Simon Newman)

Winchester's is just one of seven of these carved stone fonts in existence, all installed during the middle of the twelfth century. They came from Tournai, which is in modern Belgium and close to the French border, and were made from blue-black limestone, which is a form of limestone that can be carved and polished.

For their transport to England, the fonts were exported under the protection of a caravan organised by the Tournai guild known as the Charité-Saint-Christophe and taken either over land to Boulogne and across the Channel, or down the Scheldt and across the

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North Sea.<sup>1</sup> Because of their weight and the difficulty of land transport, their ultimate destinations were locations on the south or east coast, or places accessible by river. The Charité-Saint-Christophe had commercial links with Winchester, and probably brought the four Hampshire fonts to the county, most likely under the patronage of Bishop Henry de Blois of Winchester.

## HAMPSHIRE

### All Saints, East Meon

The font of c. 1130–40 was probably a gift to the church from Henry de Blois.<sup>2</sup> The friezes on its sides depict the creation of Adam and Eve and the Temptation (north face); the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden and Adam being shown how to dig (east face); and various animals, birds and dragons on the south and west faces. It was described by Pevsner and later co-authors as having 'splendid bold vigorous carving'.<sup>3</sup>

### St Peter, St Mary Bourne

This is the largest of the English fonts and, according to Pevsner, 'one of the most splendid'.<sup>4</sup> It is dated as c. 1150 and was perhaps a gift of Bishop Henry of Blois. There are arches on coupled colonnettes on the north and west faces; on the east and south faces are trees of life with grapes. The top of the font is circled with reeds; the corners display two birds drinking and leaves, forming an 'oriental motif'. A new base for the font was made in 1927 in Tournai.

### St Michael, Southampton

Located in the south-west corner of the church, the font's decoration is to Pevsner 'far more elementary than that on the font at Winchester'.<sup>5</sup> Each face has three medallions, on eleven of which 'grotesque figures' are carved, mostly with wings, with a single 'crude representation

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Schwartzbaum, "Three Tournai tombstones in England", *Gesta*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1981), p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Bullen, John Crook, Rodney Hubbock and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Hampshire: Winchester and the North*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press (2010), p. 242.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 468.

<sup>5</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner and David Lloyd, *Hampshire and the Isle of Wight*, London: Penguin Books (1967), p. 523.

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of a man' carved on the twelfth. The pillars that support the font are not made of Tournai marble but of Purbeck marble and have been renewed.

### Winchester Cathedral

The font in Winchester Cathedral – the 'most famous of the black Tournai fonts in England'<sup>6</sup> – illustrates scenes from the life of St Nicholas of Myra on two faces, with three roundels of birds on the third and a roundel of a quadruped with birds on either side on the fourth. It was commissioned by Henry of Blois and has been dated to 1158, when he returned from exile.<sup>7</sup> The only font in the cathedral and placed in the nave, it has been recently conserved.

### LINCOLNSHIRE AND SUFFOLK.

There are Tournai fonts in Lincolnshire at St Lawrence's, Thornton Curtis in the north of the county, and Lincoln Cathedral. Alexander of Lincoln, Bishop of Lincoln, was credited with the commissioning of the font in Lincoln Cathedral, but recent scholarship suggests that it was commissioned by his successor, Robert de Chesney. In Suffolk, the font in St Peter's, Ipswich, a redundant church, is dated to c. 1170–90, resting on a 15th-century base.

### OTHER PLACES

There are also contested claims that remnants of Tournai fonts can be found at Iffley in Oxfordshire, Boulge in Suffolk and Preshute near Marlborough in Wiltshire, while a fragment of a Tournai bowl can be found in Ipswich Museum, which may have come from the nearby Christchurch monastery.

- For a fuller description of Winchester Cathedral's font, go to: David Weait and Robert Emmerson, *The Tournai Marble Font at Winchester Cathedral*, Winchester: Friends of Winchester Cathedral (2009), which is available online at [www.wincathrecord.org](http://www.wincathrecord.org) under the Publications tab.

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<sup>6</sup> Bullen *et al*, Hampshire, p. 612.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*