The Nettlecombe Font with Representations of the Seven Sacraments

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It was a long cry in the fifteenth century from the Church of
St. Mary the Virgin, Nettlecombe, to East Anglia when roads
were bad and transit difficult, yet the conception of adorning
an octagonal font with sculptural representations of the Seven
Sacraments must have come in some way from Norfolk or
Suffolk where this class of font originated.

John Jory became rector of Nettlecombe in 1456 and Simon
de Raleigh's chantry in the south aisle was served in 1468 by
Ralph Latham. In 1469 they exchanged places and Latham
became rector and Jory chantry priest. It would not appear
that either of these priests[1] had any connection with East
Anglia, and they are not likely to have given the font which
was, probably, made between the years 1465 and 1470.

There is, however, another link in the chain of conjectures
which is more plausible. This clue is based on the marriage of
Sir John de Raleigh with Ismania de Haringnge or de Hannap,
who, after the death of her first husband married Sir John
Burghersh. Their eldest daughter Maud de Burghersh married
Thomas Chaucer,[2] who was, probably, the son of Geoffrey
Chaucer, the poet. This marriage brought him large estates,
the king created him chief butler for life, the parliament which

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[1] The name ' Latham ' points to Lancashire or Yorkshire.

[2] It is an interesting fact that during the reign of Henry IV Thomas Chaucer
succeeded Geoffrey Chaucer, the poet, as forester of North Petherton Park,
Somerset (*Collinson*, iii, 62 ; Mr. Selby in *Athenaeum*, 20/11/1886 ; *Dict. Nat.
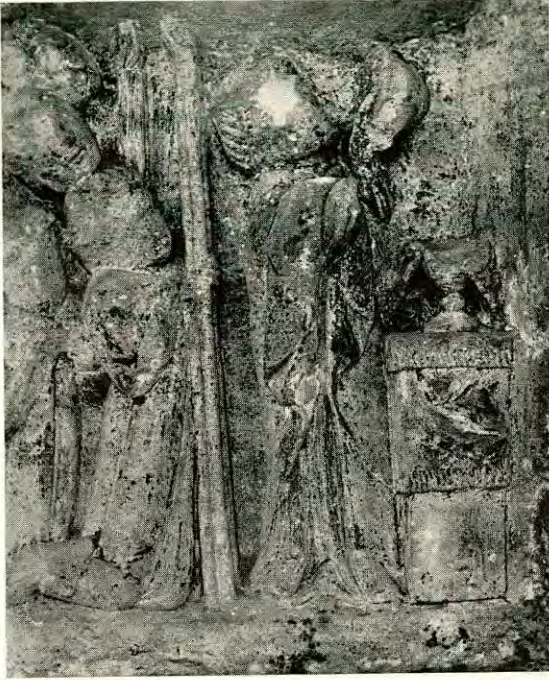Biog.* x, 167).

Plate XII

Fig. 1. The Holy Eucharist

Fig. 2. Penance

NETTLECOMBE FONT WITH
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met at Gloucester in 1407 chose him speaker, he was appointed constable of Wallingford Castle, other honours were bestowed upon him and he was looked upon as one of the wealthy men in the kingdom.

Alice, his only daughter, was born in 1404 so that in 1417 when he was appointed Constable of Taunton Castle[1] by Henry V she would be a child of thirteen years. At that date Sir Simon de Raleigh, son of Sir John de Raleigh and Ismania his wife, lived at Nettlecombe Court on his retirement after a strenuous life ' having grown infirm from the hardships and wounds which he had sustained in the service of his country.'[2]

The life of Alice Chaucer was an eventful one. A child marriage with Sir John Phillips or Phelip of Kidderminster was annulled by the death of the bridegroom in 1415 when the child-bride was eleven years old ; at the age of twenty she became a countess through her marriage with Thomas de Montacute, fourth earl of Salisbury, a famous and skilful captain who died in 1428. Two years later she changed her title of countess to that of duchess on her marriage with William de la Pole, first duke of Suffolk, whose tragic death in 1450 was one of the many fateful incidents of the reign of Henry VI.

Alice, dowager duchess of Suffolk lived a quarter of a century after this tragedy. During the years 1465 to 1470 she would see elaborately sculptured fonts adorned with representations of the Seven Sacraments placed in many East Anglian churches. Such a gift, she, probably, thought would make a suitable offering for her to place in Nettlecombe Church in memory of Ismania, her maternal grandmother, whom she may have known during her girlhood, and who for many years was mistress of Nettlecombe Court as wife of Sir John de Raleigh and mother of John de Raleigh, who died young, and of Simon and his two sisters.

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[1] ' In 1417, Thomas Chaucer, a son of the poet and a distinguished Ambassador and Member of Parliament under Henry IV and Henry V was Constable of the Castle.' Alford's *Short History of Taunton Castle*, p. 16, edit. 1923. Thomas Chaucer and Maud Burghersh his wife were buried at Ewelme (Oxon.), and their brass (1436) is a thoughtful piece of work having no unnecessary cuts or details. See Crossley's *English Church Monuments* (illus.), 252.

[2] Sir Simon de Raleigh was in Spain with the Duke of Lancaster (1387), in Guienne (1414), at Agincourt (1415) and died in 1440. See *Collinson*, iii, 538.

The font at Nettlecombe (Plate XII, fig. 2) is made of Ham Hill stone and must have been sculptured between 1465, when the first font carved with representations of the Seven Sacraments was made in Suffolk, and not later than 1470, as the ladies portrayed possess the characteristic horned head-dress of the reign of Edward IV which gave place about that date to the butterfly coiffure.

This is not the only gift of a font showing some special influence of East Anglian art made for a West-country church. The second example was also made in the fifteenth century and was, probably, presented to the Church of SS. Peter and Paul, Northleach, by either Richard Cely or his son of the same name. The young man made a stay of some duration in the spring of 1482 in the Cotswolds buying wool. He fell in love with a Northleach lady and this beautiful font of East Anglian design was most likely a gift to commemorate their marriage.

There are only two Seven Sacrament fonts out of thirty-nine still existing which are not in Norfolk or Suffolk and both belong to the earlier series. We have, as yet, not discovered the reason why the Church of SS. Peter and Paul, Farningham, Kent, came in possession of one of these fonts which is poor in design and crude in craftmanship ; we have, however, already suggested a plausible conjecture for the one at Nettlecombe.

The Nettlecombe font has an octagonal pedestal adorned with trefoil-headed niches standing on one step. The octagonal bowl is supported by half-angels holding books carved on the chamfer, and the panels are cut back with great boldness and depth. The sculpture is excellent and the arrangement of the composition of the various sacraments shows clearly that they are in no way a copy of any East Anglian font and in several cases distinct originality of treatment can be discerned. We surmise that a note on each sacrament was sent to the imager and that he carried out his design after his own imagination to a large extent, thereby making this font one of the most interesting of the series.

The Seven Sacraments ought to be arranged in the following order, yet in few cases has this been followed on these fonts.

BAPTIMUS. The manner of representing the sacrament of Baptism does not admit of great variation. The priest, vested

in surplice and stole, is depicted in the act of immersing a nude infant in an octagonal font. Two acolytes, in long surplices, carry the open ritual and the chrismatory. Frequently a woman is shown holding the chrism and other figures are introduced.

This panel at Nettlecombe is seriously damaged, but the usual arrangement is followed and we find the priest immersing an infant, an acolyte with the open ritual, the godmother holding the chrism, the godfather and another figure.

CONFIRMACIO. The bishop is usually depicted on these fifteenth-century fonts vested in a long rochet and tippet when giving Confirmation. The Synod of Exeter, 1287, decreed ' that children receive the sacrament of Confirmation within three years of their birth, if they have the opportunity of being brought to their own or some other bishop ; otherwise their parents shall fast on bread and water every Friday until they are confirmed '. Hence in this panel we find infant candidates presented to the bishop, and the child is held by the godfather or the godmother according as it is a boy or a girl. The bishop used sometimes to give Confirmation on horseback as he passed through a village. St. Hugh of Lincoln we are told, however, dismounted and administered the rite with great reverence as if he had been in his cathedral. Other bishops do not seem to have been so particular.

The panel representing Confirmation at Nettlecombe is seriously mutilated, yet the bishop is represented in alb, dalmatic, chasuble and, possibly, his mitre (defaced), is confirming an infant presented by a godfather ; an attendant priest holds the casket of oil and there is another figure.

EUKARISTIA. The representation of the Holy Eucharist is always spirited and remarkable and with some few exceptions the celebrant stands in the eastward position before the altar at the crucial moment of the elevation of the Host vested in amice, alb, stole and chasuble, while acolytes kneel holding tall torches.

The imager of the Nettlecombe font (Plate XII, fig. 1) shows the south-end view of the altar with the celebrant in eucharistic vestment standing in the eastward position at the elevation of the Host. The stone altar is covered with two altar-cloths ;

both possess fringed ends and the upper one is the 'fair linen cloth'. The chalice has been placed on the altar and covered with a veil. Two acolytes kneel holding tall rectangular torches. At Great Witchingham (Norfolk) the sculptor has selected the north-end view of the altar which, in this case, has a canopy over it.

PAENITENTIA. The usual arrangement for the Sacrament of Penance on East Anglian fonts portrays a priest, vested in surplice and stole, seated on a chair, shriving a kneeling penitent. In some cases the devil with horned head and dragon wings is found on these panels, and in others he has sprung on the back of a man preventing him going to confession, while in more than one instance he is departing, cast down and confounded, with his tail between his legs. On several fonts St. Michael is throwing out the devil or standing behind the penitent with wings extended protecting both priest and penitent. In a few cases where St. Michael is found we have at the back of the panel three large figures which from their size appear intended to represent celestial beings. As the Archangel and three saints are invoked in the prayer *Confiteor*, 'Blessed Michael the Archangel, Blessed John the Baptist and the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul'. It has, therefore, been conjectured that this may be the explanation for the presence of these four figures.

On the Nettlecombe font (Plate XII, fig. 2) we find no angel or evil spirit, yet the imager gives us an interesting piece of sculpture. The priest, vested in cassock and surplice, and seated on a low wooden stool is represented at the moment he is pronouncing the solemn words of absolution to a kneeling penitent. Behind the priest is a kneeling flagellant holding a scourge in his right hand, while in the background are two other penitents. In the upper part of the panel there appears to have been a scroll on which some of the familiar words from the formula of absolution were probably painted. This is the only instance on this series of fonts where the ecclesiastical punishment of flagellation is indicated except on the panel for penance at Gresham where the penitent is undergoing the punishment.

EXTREMA UNCIO. The panel for Extreme Unction (Plate XIII, fig. 1) portrays the dying person in bed, usually with the

coverlet turned down exposing the breast. The priest administering the sacrament, vested in surplice and stole, is attended by two acolytes, one holding the open ritual, and the other the chrismatory. Relations of the sick person are frequently introduced standing or kneeling at the bedside.

The ingenuity of the East Anglian imager has been taxed frequently to no small extent in arranging the details of this panel. On several fonts the bed is placed at so steep an angle that we marvel the sick person is not precipitated out of it, while at Cley, Norfolk, we find the priest floating in the air in a horizontal position parallel to the bed. The artist, however, who designed this interesting panel at Nettlecombe, experienced no difficulty with the bed as he simply reversed the arrangement placing it in the background of his composition. The priest, in surplice and stole, is seated on a bench as the central figure, and is in the act of anointing the ear of the dying man. The open chrismatory is laid conveniently on a low wooden stool in front of him, while the tall acolyte, in cassock and surplice, stands behind holding the open ritual. A woman is seated at the foot of the bed who is probably intended for the wife of the dying man, while in the background a man and a woman represent relations or friends. The grouping is quite original and must have been most effective when painted in colour.

ORDO. On the panel depicting Holy Orders the bishop is vested usually in alb, tunical, dalmatic, chasuble and mitre and holds his pastoral staff in his left hand, while he lays his right hand on the head of the kneeling candidate when administering this sacrament. The crucial moment selected represents the final imposition of hands accompanied by the solemn words *Accipe Spiritum Sanctum,* etc. Attendant ecclesiastics hold the book of the ritual and the casket. Other ecclesiastics are represented and one of them is always the archdeacon whose duty it was to present the candidates for ordination. If a sub-deacon is ordained a deacon he wears an alb and dalmatic ; but if a deacon is raised to the priesthood he is vested in alb and chasuble.

The most unique of these sculptures representing Holy Orders is found at Nettlecombe (Plate XIII, fig. 2). The panel is

divided into two parts. In one the bishop, in eucharistic vestments and holding his pastoral staff, is ordaining a kneeling candidate, while an ecclesiastic stands behind with the open ritual. The archdeacon is not represented, probably, for the simple reason that the imager could not find room for his portly figure. In the other part of the panel we find a barber, dressed in a short tunic, hosen, boots and a round turban cap, is shaving a tonsure on an ordinand seated on a low bench.

MATRIMONIUM. With few exceptions the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is portrayed in this series of fonts at the moment in the ceremony when the priest has joined the hands of the couple and is blessing them.

The scene at Nettlecombe (Plate XIII, fig. 3) depicts the priest, vested in surplice and narrow crossed stole, reciting the office from the manual held by his acolyte in cassock and surplice. The bridegroom is dressed in a long gown falling to his ankles, fastened round the waist with a leather belt from which is suspended his gypciere or purse, while his feet are encased in somewhat pointed-toed boots. The bride stands on his right. She wears a long gown having a bodice with tight-fitting sleeves, cut V-shape in front, edged with a broad band of fur, velvet or embroidery showing the silk or linen chemisette. Her horned head-dress indicates the reign of Edward IV, and her veil rests on two upward curved cauls hanging behind in two folds well raised off her shoulders.

More than one hundred years elapsed between the marriage of Sir John de Raleigh, to Ismania, the grandmother of Alice, duchess of Suffolk, in a quiet Gloucestershire church and the presentation of a font adorned with sculptured representations of the Seven Sacraments to Nettlecombe Church. There are instances of gifts of fonts in medieval times in commemoration of christenings, marriages and as memorials to the dead. We have already conjectured that the Nettlecombe font falls under the latter category, yet this, however, is not the only font of this series which was a memorial, as the church of All Saints, Walsoken, Norfolk, received such a present in 1544, and round the base the inscription reads : ' Remember the souls of S. Honyter and Margaret his wife, and John Beforth, chaplin.'[1]

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[1] *Fonts and Font Covers*, by Francis Bond, plate p. 242.

The panel for *Matrimony* at Nettlecombe is unlike any other on these fonts as only the priest and his acolyte, and the bride and the bridegroom are portrayed, while on all the others several figures are introduced such as the bridesmaid, groomsman, father and mother of the bride, and sometimes other relations and friends.

The Eighth Panel. All the fonts belonging to this series are octagonal in shape and as the number of sacraments to be represented are seven it was, therefore, necessary to fill in the eighth panel with some other subject. From the fourteenth century art has depicted the Seven Sacraments.[1] Roger van der Weyden painted his celebrated painting[2] (1450–1460), now in the Picture Gallery at Antwerp, where they are represented as being celebrated in a large Gothic church having in the foreground a realistic Crucifixion. In the fifteenth century glass windows in English churches we find them grouped around the Crucified Saviour, or streams of blood from the hands, feet and side of the Redeemer are directed in channels to the various groups where the Sacraments are celebrated, suggesting that they derived their virtue from His precious blood. It would seem, therefore, appropriate that the Crucifixion should have formed the subject of this panel. This, however, was not always the case, and although fourteen representations of the Crucifixion[3] still exist, we find the imager was permitted considerable latitude in the choice of a subject, and nine panels have the ‘ Baptism of Christ ’ sculptured on them. In addition to ‘ The Crucifixion ’ and ‘ the Baptism of our Lord ’ there are also eleven panels with as many as eight different subjects.[4] ‘ The Last Judgement ’ has been selected for three of these fonts, yet ‘ Christ in Glory ’ is only met with

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[1] *Arch. Journ.* lxxxvii, 24-26.   [2] *Ibid.* Plate I.

[3] *Norfolk*, Alderford, Brooke, Earsham, East Dereham, Little Walsingham, Walsoken ; *Suffolk*, Cratfield, Denston, Great Glemham, Monks’ Soham, Norwich Cathedral, Sall, South Creake, Woodbridge.

[4] *The Last Judgement* (Norfolk) Marsham, Martham ; (Suffolk) Gorleston ; *The Assumption* (Norfolk) Lodden, Great Witchingham; *Blessed Virgin and Holy Child* (Norfolk) Gayton Thorpe ; *Communion of the People* (Kent) Farningham ; *The Holy Trinity* (Norfolk) West Lynn ; *Martyrdom of St. Andrew* (Suffolk) Melton ; *St. Francis of Assisi* (Norfolk) Burgh-next-to-Aylesham ; *Christ in Glory* (Somerset) Nettlecombe.

at Nettlecombe. It is now, alas! sadly mutilated, yet, originally, it must have been finely executed and when adorned in colour it would have presented a most striking and beautiful effect. The imager has arranged the sculpture by placing our Lord, throned in glory, in the centre of his composition. He is vested and girdled, while His right hand (damaged) is raised in blessing and His left hand holds what appears to be an ' orb '. His head is crowned (damaged) and behind it is the cruciferous nimbus. On the right hand of the Saviour stands the Blessed Virgin, and St. John Baptist on His left, having the lamb and cross at his feet. No figure is more suitable on a font than that of St. John Baptist and his image frequently adorned the early Christian baptisteries, yet, strange to say, is very seldom indeed found on medieval fonts. In the Italian Renaissance, however, charming, small figures of the Baptist in white marble stand on the rim of some of these fonts. He was, indeed, ' a burning and shining light ' to our forefathers, and so great was his popularity with them that even now we possess as many as five hundred ancient churches dedicated to him.[1]

On the 31 January 1649, *The Directory of Public Worship* was set forth by order of Parliament giving the authorities various instructions and among them was ordered the destruction of fonts.[2] However, much damage had already been done to our churches a few years earlier by the ordinance of the

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[1] Francis Bond, *Dedications of English Churches*, 42, 43.

[2] There are 39 Seven Sacrament fonts still existing; four at Croxton (Norfolk) Blythburgh, Southwold, Wenhaston (Suffolk) have all the sculpture completely removed, while the eighth panel at Cley has been similarly treated and several like Binham Abbey, Gorleston and South Creake (Suffolk) are so defaced that it is difficult to interpret the subject depicted on the panels. Other fonts like those at Gayton Thorpe, Seething and Sloley (Norfolk) are wonderfully perfect, and the one at Gresham (Norfolk) was covered over with plaster before the arrival of the visitors of 1643 at the Church, and this was not removed until a recent date. The Earl of Manchester, as General of certain associated counties, was appointed to carry out the Ordinance of 1643, and for that purpose he selected fanatics such as William Dowsing and his chief deputy Francis Jessup of Beccles. Both men have left *Journals* of the ravages they wrought in the churches they visited in East Anglia. Francis Jessup's account of his work at Lowestoft and Gorleston (Suffolk) surpasses anything of the kind on record. This shameless iconoclast laments in his *Journal* that he could not destroy the upper windows at Gorleston as no one would lend him the use of a ladder.
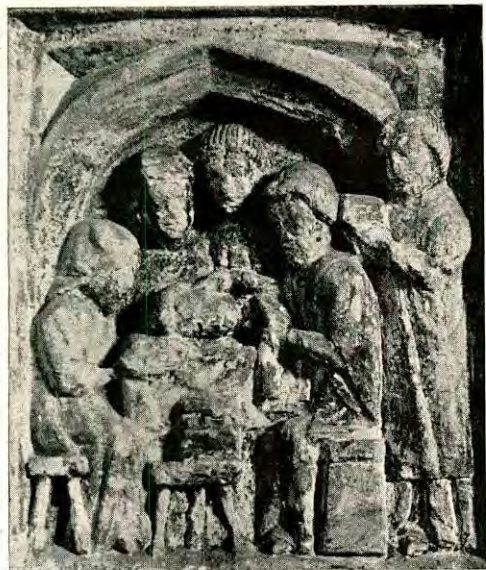
PLATE XIII

Fig. 1. Extreme Unction   Fig. 2. Holy Orders   Fig. 3. Matrimony

NETTLECOMBE FONT WITH REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

28 August 1643, directing the general demolition of altars, the removal of candlesticks and the defacement of pictures and images. These parliamentarian visitors destroyed or mutilated countless treasures of English art in their iconoclastic zeal. It is probable, therefore, that the mutilation of the three panels on the Nettlecombe font, representing Baptism, Confirmation and the eighth panel, took place at this visitation in 1643 or 1644, while the sculpture on the other five panels escaped destruction owing to the fact that the font may have then stood in some corner or other screened position in the church.

May we remind you that it requires all our powers of imagination to picture the beauty of the Nettlecombe font when it was rich in its adornment of colour. The medieval system of colour design more or less followed the rules of heraldry : thus fillets of gold or white would separate red mouldings from green ones, coloured grounds were powdered over with white devices and gilded carvings would possess backgrounds of blue. This bowl with its eight panels of sculpture, each less than a foot in area and containing several figures, would be highly decorative. The use of clear bright colours carefully mixed would blend in a most harmonious composition, while the chamfer possessing coloured angels with outspread wings, holding books, would be wonderfully effective.

TOPOGRAPHICAL INDEX

Bowl. Octagonal having panels cut well back with considerable depth and boldness. Seven are adorned with sculpture representing the Seven Sacraments and executed with great originality. The eighth panel has sculpture depicting ' Christ in Glory '. Exterior depth with chamfer, 1 ft. 7 in. ; rim, 4 in. ; interior diameter, 1 ft. 7 in. ; interior depth, 11 in. ; each panel, 1 ft. 2 in. by 1 ft., and sculpture, 11 in. by 10 in. Octagonal chamfer adorned with 8 demi-angels with outspread wings holding books. Octagonal pedestal and base, height 2 ft. 1 in. adorned on each face with trefoil-headed niche ; one moulded octagonal step. Made of Ham Hill stone, *c.* 1465–1470.

References. Harvey Pridham's *Ancient Church Fonts of Somerset*, Vol. I, no. 3, and Vol. of typed notes (Taunton Castle Library) : Paley's *Baptismal Fonts*, illustration shows font with

panels for the holy eucharist, holy orders and matrimony (1844) ; *Arch. Journ.* lix, 21, 24, 27–30, 35, 38–65, Pls. IV, fig. 1 ; IX, fig. 2 ; XII, fig. 2 ; XIII, fig. 2 ; LXXXVII, 58 ; Wall's *Porches and Fonts,* 315, 316, 317, 318 ; Francis Bond's *Fonts and Font Covers,* 257 ; *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* xv, i, 7 ; Tyrrell-Green's *Baptismal Fonts,* 130, 131 ; Wade's *Somerset,* 193 ; Hutton's *Highways and Byways in Somerset,* 338.

REMARKS.   The eighth panel and those for baptism and confirmation are seriously mutilated, while the other five are in good preservation.   Thus it would seem that the font may have stood in some corner of the church and the iconoclasts were unable to disfigure the other five panels.   Butler's sketch shows the pedestal standing on two octagonal platforms, while Paley's drawing gives only one. Paley, however, describes the eighth panel incorrectly as ' The Blessed Trinity ' instead of ' Christ in Glory '.