

Holy Water stoup
Recovered from the site of the former Bussey's Garage, Palace Street, Norwich

NHER
GR



Fig.1 Scale in centimetres

The stoup bowl is formed out of a single piece of fine grained limestone (possibly Portland stone). The bowl itself is circular with a flat bottom. It has been filled with mortar of which some remains. The score marks for the lay out are clearly visible and claw chisel tooling is in evidence. There is no sign of painted colour as it must assuredly have had.

The bowl is contained within a polygonal stone with one right angled side where the stone was set into an internal corner. This is very likely to have been in a church porch in the angle between the door and the wall of the porch. The polygon is a half octagon with three full facets and two half facets. The underside of the bowl tapers to a roughly finished polygon which may have been the seating for a shaft giving the bowl extra support (Fig. 2).



Fig 2

The facets are finely carved in *bas relief* with the central facet showing crossed bishops' crosiers threaded through the letter 'M' (Fig 3).



Fig. 3

The crosiers have crocketed heads. The letter is flanked by bishops' mitres (Figs 4 & 5)



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The mitres are *pretiosa* with *circulus* and *titulus* bands decorated with jewels. They have fringed lappets and the *cornua* rise to quite high peaks yet the sides of the mitres are vertical. The left hand mitre depicts textured embroidery incorporating a single motif on each side perhaps representing a precious stone or metal sewn in. The right hand mitre has a plain background but with the same jewel or metal motifs. The sloping sides of the mitres are decorated with crocket-like motifs and their tips overlap the frame within the facet of the polygon. Mitres have changed shape radically since they were first used in early Christian liturgical dress. The mitres on the stoup are typical of the stage of development for the 14th century¹.

The decoration on the half facets are each of half a flower (fig. 6)



Fig.6

The underside of the bowl is decorated with floral motifs carved naturalistically but of not readily identifiable flora (figs 2, 7 & 8). The angles of the tapering polygon are



Figs 7 & 8

each decorated with floral arrangements which seem to represent grapes or berries wrapped in leaves. There are four posies altogether of which one is badly damaged.

Conclusion

This stoup with its episcopal symbols and the letter 'M' almost certainly mean that it comes from the church of St Martin-at-Palace, the bishop's church just outside the palace gates. The naturalistic sculpture and the shapes of the mitres suggest a date during the second half of the 14th century, although there is little comparable dated work.

The stoup was regarded as a superstitious popish nonsense by the iconoclasts of the 17th century and this was probably when the stoup was removed. It is of interest that it was removed carefully and not smashed. Although the stoup was found near the church of St Martin it was outside the church yard presumably where it had been kept or possibly buried as was commonly done with baptismal fonts. A strong possibility is that the stone was re-used as a quoin and the side of the stone has flat chisel marks which may relate to dressing the stone for re-use. Freestone of this quality was of course a valuable commodity in Norfolk which has no local source of freestone. This would explain the mortar found inside the bowl.

Although stoups are rare in Anglican churches they survive in some cases and, of course, are still used in Roman Catholic churches. They are usually simple roughly cut bowls whilst the St Martin example is of exceptional quality. A comparable example of a stoup still in situ survives at Hackford in Wicklewood civil parish (Fig. 9).



Fig.9

Stephen Heywood FSA
Norfolk County Council. September 2008

Notes

¹ For the descriptive terms and history of the mitre see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10404a.htm> which is an excerpt from the *Catholic Encyclopedia* by J Braun. Vol. 10. New York, 1911