

PLATE FROM A LOST OXFORD COLLEGE

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When Canon Scott Robertson described the plate of Canterbury Cathedral in 1887¹ he listed 'two smaller Alms-dishes (Elizabethan or Jacobean) 11 inches in diameter and $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches high. Upon the bottom of one is punctured 20 oz. $\frac{1}{4}$, and on the other 19 oz. $\frac{3}{4}$. The centre is bossed up to form a convex sexfoil with a projecting point between each pair of its curves. The rim has a small but elaborate moulding' (Pl. I). This last is in fact a series of rosettes formed of groups of five pellets cast from a repeating die. The basins received no further attention until they were described again by the Rev. C. E. Woodruff in 1905.² He suggested no date for them but commented 'it seems not unlikely, however, that they may be identified with the "two sylver Bassons lately belonging to Canterbury College (Oxford)," mentioned in the inventory of 1562'.³

Three years earlier, J. Wickham Legg and W. H. St. John Hope had published their 'Inventories of Christ Church, Canterbury' which was so full of thought-provoking material that it is not surprising that some clues had been overlooked. Woodruff's comment must have been merely a guess since there is no suggestion that he had ever delved into the records of Canterbury College in the cathedral archives. In 1923, W. A. Pantin began a thorough study of these, which resulted in three volumes entitled *Canterbury College, Oxford*, published by the Oxford Historical Society. We shall only be concerned with the first of these which was published in 1947.

In the later Middle Ages both of the ancient universities were composed of colleges and a number of unestablished halls which were being gradually eroded by benefactors who turned them into colleges.

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, xvii (1887), 318-9.

² *Ibid.*, xxvii (1905), 270-1.

³ Actually, 1563.

Besides eleven colleges for lay students, there were at Oxford at the time of the accession of Henry VIII half as many tied to one of the religious orders.

St. Bernard's served the Cistercians, St. Mary's the Austin Canons, but there were three for the Benedictines. Gloucester was a joint effort of the great abbeys in the Severn area, Durham was maintained by Durham cathedral priory and Canterbury by the cathedral priory of Christ Church, Canterbury.

When Archbishop Islip founded Canterbury College in 1363, he planned that its control should be balanced between seculars and religious. This scheme did not work and before long the complete control was won by the monks. This was legalized by Archbishop Courtenay in 1381 and in the period with which we shall be concerned the college had an establishment of a warden and fellows who were all monks of Christ Church, Canterbury, five secular scholars, a manciple and a cook. There were besides an uncertain number of sojourners who might be monks from other houses but who were not upon the foundation. There survive nine inventories ranging between 1443 and 1534. The religious plate was listed with the contents of the chapel.

The more valuable secular plate was kept in the warden's chamber and the less important in a cupboard in the hall. Wardens tended to hold office for about ten years and the dates of the inventories tend to correspond with the resignation of a warden or the take-over by his successor. The inventories dating between 1443 and 1524,⁴ although marred by inaccuracies, reflect a stable state of affairs and contrast with that taken by William Sandwich when he took over in 1534. The chapel had been stripped of plate (even the copper altar cross,) and what remained was stored with the secular plate in the warden's chamber. Most of the chapel plate was safe, but two chalices which were charged to William Jerom and John Warham had either been lost or sold by them. Had there been a robbery followed by a panic or was there a threat of dissolution? Wolsey had fallen four years earlier so any threat of incorporation in Cardinal College would have been in suspense. There is no certainty as to when or how the college came to its end. Knowles and Hadcock merely suggest 'c. 1539' which would suggest that it lingered on until almost the date of the dissolution of the cathedral priory in March 1540. The Court of Augmentations would not have considered it a very valuable prize since it owned no land. The buildings survived until the eighteenth century as part of Christchurch College but with the exception of the basins, there appears to be no record of any other movables having been returned to Canterbury.

Two basins of silver are recorded in all the inventories and prior to

⁴ W. A. Pantin, *Canterbury College, Oxford*, (1923), 1, 9, 28, 34, 50, 55, 65, 75, 77.

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1534 had always been listed in the chapel. This proves that they were used for ablutions. They are stated as having been the gift of Prior Thomas Chillenden (1390–1411) who had rebuilt the nave of the cathedral and had been an important donor of plate and other furnishings. It is never stated that the basins were inscribed but it is quite probable the connection with the donor was recorded by his initials or cypher. Three of the inventories do not mention the weights of the basins but when these are given, their evidence is most inconclusive. The earliest inventory which gives weights is dated 1459 and the 39 oz. agrees with that of the basins now at Canterbury. Thereafter there was a tendency to give the weight as 29 oz. which can be explained but not excused, by supposing that the scribe forgot one x when copying xxxix. The weights given in 1501 (20 oz.) and 1510 (9 oz.) are entirely out of line. It must be remembered that the chapel plate occupied only a small space in each inventory, which included all the furniture of the college including vestments and an ever-growing list of books in the library. It was a boring task even if it had only to be repeated every ten years.

After their reappearance in the Canterbury inventory of 1563,⁵ the basins are mentioned on the occasion of the entry of the Bishop of Dover into the Deanery in 1584—‘Item two bazens of Sylvr parcell gylt weighing (*not filled in*)’⁶. Next they reappear in 1634 as ‘two silver basons parcell guilt ye one weighing 20 ounces one quarter and the other 19 ounces 3 quarters’.⁷ In 1662 they reappear as ‘Two small Silver Basons’ which is repeated in 1689 and 1735.⁸ In 1745, it is mentioned that they were for collecting alms.⁹ This has probably been their use for most of the time since then. This, however, is not the end of the adventures of Prior Chillenden’s basins since one of them was in the wooden cupboard broken into by burglars on the 15th March, 1968. It was recovered by the police from a dump in Peckham. The large Caroline flagon and the fine pieces of later date were not discarded and have not reappeared.

In the Middle Ages silver ablution basins are only found in inventories of important churches or else in episcopal chapels. The latter were much larger as may be seen in the case of the two

⁵ J. Wickham Legg and W. H. St. John Hope, *Inventories of Christchurch, Canterbury*, (1902), 224.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 240. I am not unduly disturbed by the fact that both in 1584 and 1634 the basins were described as parcel-gilt since in all the other inventories, before and after, they are called silver. The gilding is merely upon the narrow ornamental rims, so that the gold would have been irrecoverable, if the basins were melted down.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 275, 283, 293.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 298.

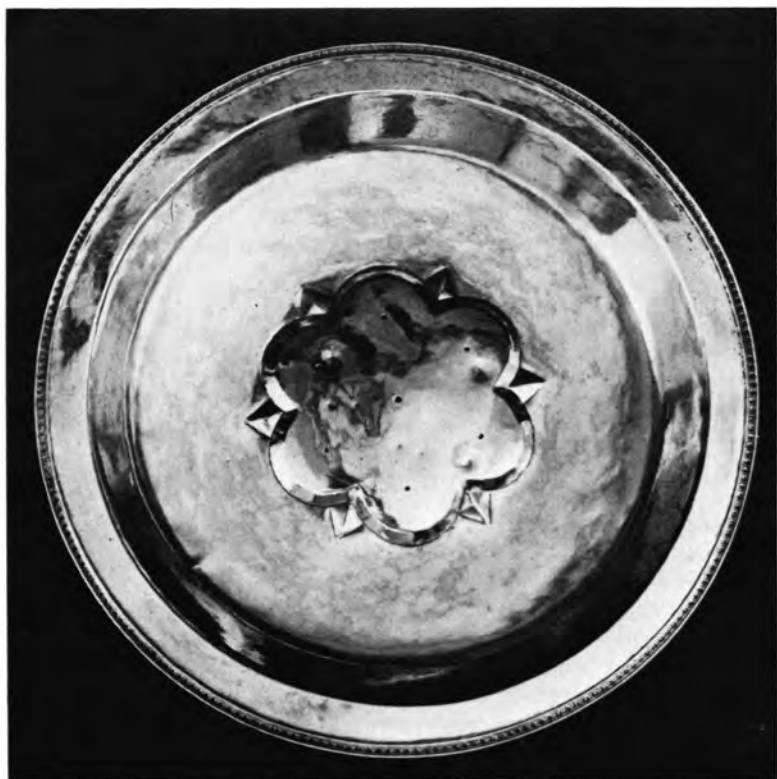
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bequeathed by Bishop Fox to Corpus Christi College, Oxford. There are no basins with which Prior Chillenden's basins can be compared, and looking further afield, there are very few pieces made about 1400 which have come down to us. They must be considered as belonging to the same phase which saw produced the Studley Bowl.

In conclusion I must record my thanks to the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury Cathedral for giving me facilities for studying the basins and for providing me with the photograph. I must especially thank Canon D. Ingram Hill, for much help and for organizing facilities.

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One of a Pair of Silver Ablution Basins, c. 1400 (Diam.: 11 in.)
(*Courtesy of the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury Cathedral*)