THE BAPTISTERY

The rite of baptism into membership of the Christian church has taken a variety of forms over centuries and in different traditions. Custom in the English medieval parish church was that the font holding the water of baptism should stand near the church door, symbolising entry into Christian life. With the reformation, protestant conviction favoured the use of a temporary basin set down anywhere convenient within the church rather than a permanent font. No drawings have ever been found of the interior of the medieval church of the Holy Trinity; Edward Hassel's drawing of about 1822 includes a slender "birdbath" font standing in front of the communion table at the east end of the Palladian church. Blomfield's plan (1885) shows it was subsequently moved to the traditional place near the main, north door. However, by this time the style of font had been criticised as inadequate by the Archdeacon in 1864 and 1880, when reporting on his triennial inspections of the church.

C18 font when standing near the north door. Courtesy Surrey History Centre

Almost twenty years later, Miss Florence Russell (descendant of John Russell, pastel portraitist) and Horace Shepherd Folker, (a local pharmisist and previously a member of the parish), provided what was seen as a fitting solution for this problem. Both sought to commemorate dead relatives. Miss Russell gave the font which now stands on the south side of the church in memory of her sisters, Clara Gertrude (d 7/ 1/ 1893) and Amy Eleanor (d 2/ 2 /1909). It was made in Alabaster by Hems and Sons of Exeter, with cherub heads around a large basin on a drum with four lesser columns. This was a flamboyant contrast to its delicate predecessor, which was sent out to the chapel of the Holy Trinity at Zagwityi in South Africa. The Rev. Robert Calloway wrote back to Guildford by the spring of 1912 to say he had recently dedicated it there and baptised "a child of a native School Teacher" in it.

Horace Folker offered to provide a baptistery for the new font by converting the north porch at a cost of £250, "to the glory of God and in memory of his wife, Margaret." The baptistery and font were dedicated during Matins on the Festival of St Stephen, 1909.

The Baptistry with font and cover in position. Courtesy Surrey Histiory Centre.

The font stood in the centre of the small chapel with a pulley above to raise and lower the elaborate cover, given by Horace Folker. The cover is also a memorial, carrying the inscription "In memoriam Edwardus VII Dei Gra: Brt: Omn: Rex Fid: Def: Ind: Imp: Ob VI Mai"(1910). Eric Lunn designed it. He had trained as an architect with William Woodyer, was a sidesman at Holy Trinity for many years and used his professional skills generously for his church. He based the design on the curves of the

pediment of George Abbot's tomb. The royal arms and those of the Province of Canterbury, the Diocese of Winchester and the Borough of Guildford were carved on four oak panels above the inscription. The rector, Canon Valpy wrote in the parish Annual Report for 1910 of the late King's "masterly diplomacy in the interests of peace and his untiring care of the sick and suffering." Thus, though the link is largely unnoticed now, the traditional connection between death and rebirth, implicit in baptism, was strongly underlined in font and chapel .
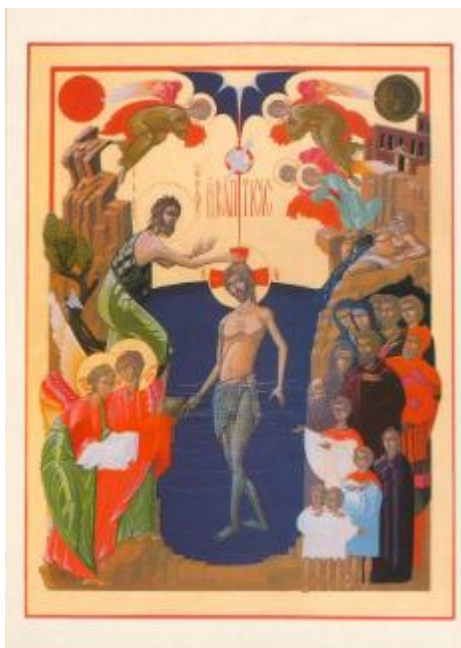
In 1994, in tune with the current wish that baptisms should be seen to take place within the parish community, Brother Anselm of Alton Priory was commissioned to make an icon of the baptism of Christ to hang on the south side of the main church. The font was moved to stand beside it and a new, simpler, flat cover, carved with a symbol of the Trinity, was designed for it. The previous cover is being stored in the basement of the Trinity Centre.

With the removal of the font, the north chapel became the chapel of St Luke, a place for quiet prayer. The 1994 refurbishment was carried out in memory of Rowan Paul Thompson, who died in 1991, aged 15 years. An embroidered hanging of the Ascension on the west wall, designed and made by his mother, Elaine Thompson provides a striking focus. While representing Christ ascending, seven overlaid silhouettes of the human form on layers of sheer screen printed silk organza convey an impression of the spirit leaving the body at death. At the same time, the artist describes the colours of deep blue, green, rose and gold as being the colours of life.

(Note: the Ascension hanging can be seen in the companion website article on 'Windows and Textiles'.)