

DISPOSAL OF FONTS AND ALTARS

The purpose of this document is to provide parishes, clergy and DAC members, with information for the disposal of unwanted fonts and altars. It discusses their historic significance, the protection afforded to them as part of a listed building and the old or supposed tradition of destruction when no longer needed. Most importantly, it examines the options now available when wishing to dispose of them.

1. Introduction

There are conflicting beliefs and information on what can, and cannot, be done with an unwanted font or altar. Many people believe the traditional way of disposing of an unwanted font is to bury it (intact or broken up), either within the church (under the floor) or in the churchyard. Similarly, redundant stone altars have been broken up or buried, and wooden altar tables burned if no longer needed for their original purpose. Whilst the tradition of destruction may in fact have been exercised in only a small minority of cases, the treatment of artistically and historically significant items in this way can no longer be justified.

Fountains and altars are considered to be key parts of a church's fixtures and fittings, and contribute to its overall significance and character, especially if they are part of an original or early scheme, or of a later all-encompassing architectural design. This means they are protected regardless of whether the church is listed or not and a faculty will be required to determine whether they can be removed.

Decisions on disposal of fonts and altars can vary on a case-by-case basis, and in England several font disposal applications have been the subject of recent consistory court judgements. It is therefore important that clear advice is available for parishes, clergy and DACs when considering the disposal of unwanted fonts and altars.

2. Historical Significance

a) Fonts

The font was traditionally sited at the western end of the nave, where the church entrance was most likely to be, and symbolised the entrance of the Christian soul into the church. It is frequently the oldest surviving element of a church, many pre-Reformation examples remaining in otherwise wholly Victorian rebuildings.

Since then, a number of font bowls have been found buried in churches, sometimes beneath a newer font or elsewhere under the floor, in the churchyard, or (less happily) in the vicarage garden¹. Occasionally, the old font bowl is inverted and used as a base for the new font to stand upon. Although the practice of font bowl burial may seem strange to modern eyes, baptism in the medieval church was symbolic of both birth and death. The burial of the

¹ Fons et origo: the symbolic death, burial and resurrection of English font stones by David Stocker. *Church Archaeology* (Volume 1 pp17-25) 1997.

old font signifying its “death” (ie. the end of its functional life) and shows the reverence afforded to it as a sacred object.

It is unclear whether ancient fonts were consecrated individually in the past, as most would have been blessed as part of the service of consecration for the church itself, along with other fixtures and fittings. The baptismal water within the font bowl, was always blessed, giving the bowl a special significance as a receptacle, also leading to the practice of covering the font with a lid (sometimes lockable) to prevent contamination and theft. Some older font bowls sit on new pedestals, implying the bowl was held in greater reverence than the pedestal.

In England, a few font bowls have incorporated or reused earlier Anglo Saxon and Roman artefacts and elements, a pragmatic approach not yet identified in Wales. With very rare exceptions, such as Partrishow (Breconshire), the earliest surviving font bowls in Wales date from the Norman era. An example can be found at the late Victorian Church of St Llawddog Cenarth, which has a 12th century font bowl, said to have come from the church at Llandysiliogogo. It was apparently found doing “duty as a pig trough in a farmyard” before being placed on an elaborately carved shaft and base.²

b) Altars

The altar is used for the celebration of Holy Communion and is usually sited in an elevated position in the sanctuary or between the nave and chancel. Additional altars can also be found within side chapels, aisles or transepts. They were originally made of stone until the Reformation in the 16th century, when they were removed and replaced by wooden communion tables. Unlike most other church contents, they were always consecrated individually, and a service of de-consecration performed before their disposal.

Some stone altars were broken up and buried in the church or churchyard during the Reformation. Some were even incorporated into the building fabric of the church; one such example is believed to exist at the Church of St David, Laleston (nr Bridgend). Here, part of a stone altar table with a diamond pattern and three consecration crosses, was found in the north wall of the chancel in 1958. It is understood to have been part of the old High Altar of Llangewydd Church.

Examples of buried stone altar slabs have been found during grave digging and churchyard works and have been brought back into use. In south Wales, these include Ewenny, Mawdlam, Merthyr Dyfan, Newton Nottage, Pyle, St Donats, Wick, Kemeys Commander, Llandenny, Llanfihangel Crucorney, Llantilio Pertholey, Michaelston-y-Fedw, Penallt Old Church, Rogiet, Skenfrith, and St Pierre.³ Remarkably, at remote Pontfaen (Pembrokeshire), three stone altars were still in situ in 1861, but removed in a subsequent restoration.⁴

3. Statutory Protection

All fixtures and fittings in a church are considered to be integral parts of the building and as such require a faculty for their disposal. Any faculty application for the disposal of a font or altar will be reviewed in the normal way at a DAC meeting and the Representative Body will be asked to comment on it (as owners of the church and its contents). The DAC or the

² Information from St Llawddog’s Church in the regional HER (maintained by Dyfed Archaeological Trust)

³ Information from Gwent and Glamorgan Archaeological Trust (email query 27th Jan 2020)

⁴ The Buildings of Wales: Pembrokeshire (Pevsner Architectural Guide)

Representative Body may also choose to consult the Cathedrals and Churches Commission. Information about the font or altar will need to accompany the application and must include photographs and its location within the church, its history (for example, whether it was created by a well known craftsman or architect, donated by a local family, moved from another church, set within a specially designed space, etc) and its significance.

If the church is listed, the DAC Secretary will notify various statutory consultees about the faculty application and invite them to respond with any comments they may have. Depending on the historic or artistic significance of the items, the statutory consultees may include the Local Planning Authority, Cadw, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales and various Amenity Societies (eg. The Victorian Society, Georgian Group, etc). Their responses will form part of the supporting documentation for the faculty application and assist the Chancellor in arriving at his determination.

Sometimes, church contents can be considered of such importance that they are classed as church treasures. This means that their disposal must be carefully considered and expert advice sought about their disposal. Further information about this, and many other items relating to church contents, can be found in the *Church in Wales' Contents of Churches: Policy and Guidance* note.⁵

4. Disposal

There is a belief, almost certainly of long-standing, that a font cannot be used for any other purpose than as a receptacle for baptismal water, and once no longer required in this capacity, must be put beyond use – either by burial or breaking up. Neither course of action is recommended by the Representative Body.

Given their sacred nature, the disposal of a font or altar will always be more emotive than the disposal of other church contents. It is therefore vitally important that an assessment of their significance is undertaken **before** disposal options are considered (eg. relocation to another church, sale, burial, etc). The decision on the method of disposal must be justified in the faculty application and may need the permission of the Bishop in very rare cases where destruction is sought. If the item is historically significant, a written and photographic record will need to be prepared prior to disposal. This will then be submitted to the relevant Historic Environment Record (HER) which is administered by the regional Welsh Archaeological Trusts.

A Diocesan Chancellor will always give regard to a font's sacramental significance when determining any faculty application for its disposal; the same is true for any requests for the disposal of altars and communion plate.

a) Assessing significance

Fonts and altars can be important for their artistic, historical or liturgical significance. It is therefore important to conduct research into the item in question. This is especially important if it was part of an original or early scheme for the church, where the interior fixtures and fittings were complimentary to the overall design aesthetic of the building. Any findings should be used to support the faculty application.

⁵ A copy can be obtained from the Property pages on the Church in Wales website at: <https://www.churchinwales.org.uk/en/> or by emailing property@churchinwales.org.uk.

Consider the following sources when researching your font or altar (see Appendix for links):

- If your church is listed, is the altar or font described in the listed building description?
- Is the altar or font described in the HER record of your church?
- If your church is medieval in origin, does it have an entry in the Welsh Historic Churches survey? It may also include a description of the font or altar.
- If your church has an entry in the relevant Pevsner *Building of Wales* volume, are the font or altar also described?
- If your DAC has a member who is a heritage specialist, ask for advice.
- If your church has a guidebook, check for any descriptions of the font or altar.

b) Disposal options

Some disposal options are better than others! Which option you choose will be dependent on the significance of your font or altar and the reason for seeking removal: most obviously whether it is being disposed of due to church closure. All fixtures and fittings in a church are owned by the Representative Body and a faculty for their disposal will be required, even if the items in question are being relocated within the church or taken to another church.

Whilst every care should be taken to ensure that a good and appropriate home or use is found for unwanted fonts and altars, this cannot be always be guaranteed. In the case of the sale of these items, parishes may wish to seek some assurance from the new owner that they will be treated with the respect they deserve. However, it must be remembered that once such items are removed from their ecclesiastical setting, they effectively become secular objects, and will almost certainly not be used in their original capacity.

i) Relocation within the current church

This would always be the preferred option for any font or altar, especially if it was commissioned as part of an overall scheme. It retains its original context and historical association with the church.

ii) Relocation to a new church

Whilst this would hopefully ensure the continued use of the font or altar, it may not necessarily fit in aesthetically with its new surroundings. Its provenance (where it came from) would also need to be recorded in the church inventory.

iii) Relocation to a museum

If a font or altar is considered to be of such high significance – a church treasure - that its disposal will constitute a major loss locally or nationally, then it may be considered as a bequest to a museum. Contact your DAC Secretary or the Representative Body for advice.

iv) Storage

If no new home can immediately be found for an unwanted font or altar, it may be acceptable to keep it in storage. This must be secure and dry and at a temperature that will not degrade the item.

v) Sale

The sale of a font or altar must always be fully justified, especially if it is of high significance. In cases where the item is considered to be a church treasure, an independent report may

be commissioned. Any faculty application submitted in respect of a sale must always comply with the *Church in Wales' Contents of Churches: Policy and Guidance* note.

vi) Font Burial

The Representative Body will only consider this option in exceptional circumstances.

vii) Destruction

If parishes feel that none of the previous options for disposal are viable and want the font or altar destroyed, then they must seek the approval of the Bishop, in addition to obtaining a faculty. However, it must be remembered that this course of action will not be acceptable for items that are of historic significance. Any item in this category will need to be disposed of by relocation, storage or sale.

viii) Record

If either of options ii-vii is adopted, a full photographic survey and report will need to be prepared (including precise details of the new location) and submitted to the regional HER.

Summary

If you are unsure what to do with an unwanted font or altar, speak to your DAC secretary in the first instance. They will be able to advise what supporting documentation you will need to accompany your faculty application. For highly significant items, such as church treasures, an independent expert opinion may be sought by the DAC (eg. from the Cathedral and Churches Commission). If any such items are considered to be culturally important to the Welsh nation, then placement in a museum should be considered.

APPENDIX

Historic Wales Website

One of the best online resources is the Historic Wales website where you can access Listed Building Records, Historic Environment Records, National Monuments Records, Scheduled Ancient Monuments Records and the National Museum Archaeology collection. Click [here](#) to go to the website.

“The Buildings of Wales” County Volumes (“Pevsners”)

There are seven regional volumes of the Pevsner Buildings of Wales’ books now available. They cover the whole of the Principality and are published by Yale University Press. Most local libraries will hold the volume relevant to their particular region. They can also be bought directly from local bookshops or online (eg. from Amazon).

Welsh Historic Churches Survey

All pre 19th century churches in Wales were surveyed by the four Welsh Archaeological Trusts in the late 1990s, with each covering its own region. The online availability of the survey data varies from trust to trust, although all will supply you with the information if you contact them. Click on the links below to go to the Trust websites:

[Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust](#)

[Dyfed Archaeological Trust](#)

[Gwynedd Archaeological Trust](#)

[Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust](#)

The Archwilio Website

All [HERs](#) can be accessed via the Historic Wales website, although they can also be accessed on the Archwilio website. The advantage of using Archwilio directly is that you can search by geographical area, local authority, historical period and using free text. You can also see if your church is located in a conservation area, designated park & garden, world heritage site and historic landscape, by locating its HER on a map. This is useful if you are planning any external works within these historic areas. Click [here](#) to go to the website.