

WELLS cathedral, Somerset.

At Wells cathedral there is, in the south transept, a rare survivor, an Anglo-Saxon font, which was moved from the old cathedral to the new cathedral which was commenced c.1170.

A background history.

The church of St Andrew at Wells is reputed to have been founded in the early eighth century, by Ine, king of Wessex; but little is known of its history in the eighth and ninth centuries.

Wells was known as Fontinetum in the Anglo-Saxon period. This may be a survival from the Roman name, which derives from a series of springs rising to the E of the present cathedral – one of which was dedicated to St. Andrew by the C8. The site has a complex history: sometime in the Roman period a mausoleum with a subterranean burial chamber was constructed 50m to the W of this well. Primary interments were placed into the chamber, and secondary burials were placed on the floor at ground level. In the C8 or sometime before, Christian burials were being made to the W of the structure. Later, the Roman mausoleum was dismantled and the primary burials removed, while the secondary burials were shifted into the subterranean chamber, and the remains of the structure were levelled, over which a chapel was built that contained the graves of three adults and two children, cut through the floor. To the W of this structure a nave was added, and the chapel dedicated to St Mary the Virgin. The Anglo-Saxon minster of St Andrew was built to the immediate W by 776, aligned to the chapel of St. Mary, 18° from E/W; the subsequent town took its alignment from this complex. As at Exeter and York, the subsequent Norman rebuilding of the cathedral reorientated it to an E/W axis. Dates for the early cemetery is based on a C8 Frisian sceatta, coloured window and vessel glass (possibly Merovingian), and radiocarbon date from a skeleton of 730 +/-70 (see the Radiocarbon appendix for the most recent recalibrations. **Not shown here**)."

W. J. Rodwell, 'Above and Below Ground: Archaeology at Wells Cathedral', in T. Tatton-Brown and J. Munby (eds.), *The Archaeology of Cathedrals* (Oxford: 1996), 115-33.

W. J. Rodwell, 'Churches in the Landscape: Aspects of Topography and Planning', in M. L. Faull (ed.), *Studies in Late Anglo-Saxon Settlement* (Oxford: 1984), 1-23, esp. 13-14. See Figure 6.

W. J. Rodwell, 'The Origins of Wells Cathedral', *Antiquity* 56 (1982), 215-18.

W. J. Rodwell, 'From Mausoleum to Minster: the Early Development of Wells Cathedral', in S. Pearce (ed.), *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: 1982), 49-59. See Figure 5.3.

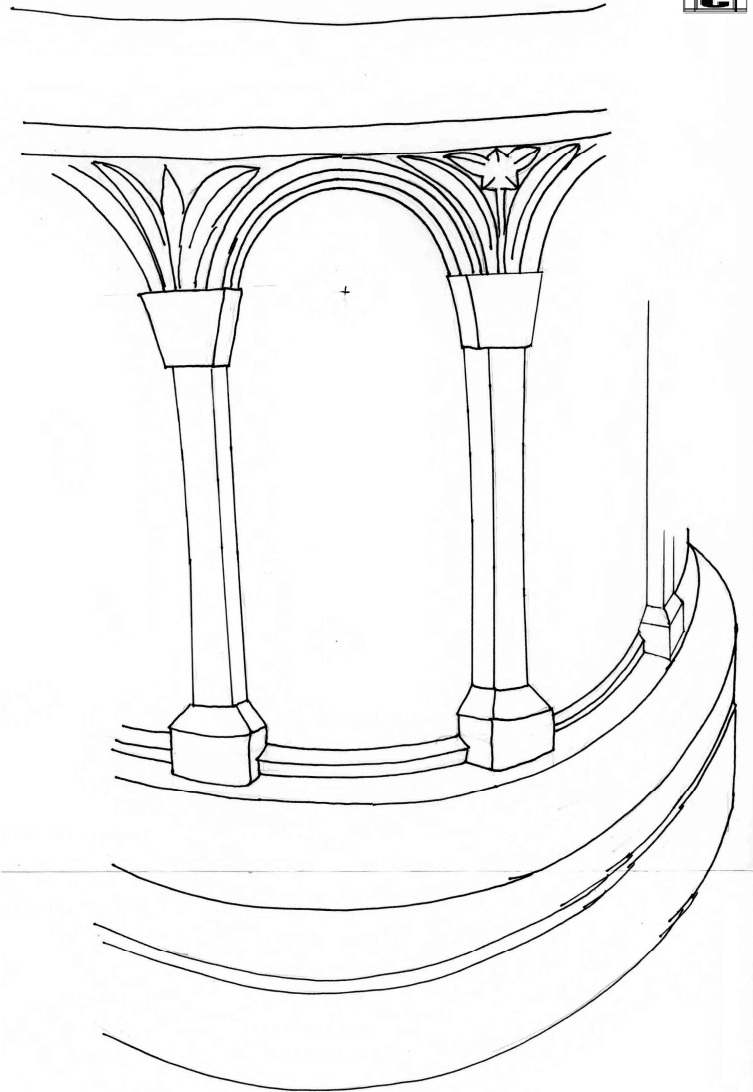
W. J. Rodwell, 'The Anglo-Saxon and Norman Churches at Wells', in L. S. Colchester (ed.), *Wells Cathedral* (Shepton Mallet: 1982), 1-23.

W. J. Rodwell, *Wells Cathedral: Excavations and Discoveries*, 2nd edition (Wells: 1980).

Geake, H. (1997) *The Use of Grave Goods in Conversion-Period England, c.600-c.850* (BAR British Series 261), 177.

The following photographs are of the Anglo-Saxon font. It has in medieval times been reworked to show the arcade with slightly pointed arches (in the then style of the times, perhaps in the 13th century).





The left hand photograph (above) is of a part of the font and the reconstruction to the right shows the arches as being in their original semi-circular form, and also shows a font base of pre-conquest style much after the manner of one of the crossing bases in Miborne Port church. The font now sits on a later base. It can be seen how the bases of the columns/shafts are severely truncated (possibly necessitated when removed from the original base). The restoration shows the shaft bases full depth as they would have appeared. The capitals have been worked back by perhaps as much as 7 or 8mm with the result that their faces are now on the same plane as the shafts. The detail in the spaces between and above the arches are also defaced and are missing their original surface detail. I have tried to show this in the drawing although the sketch is actually of another arch on the face of the font. There are eight blind archways in the arcade.

The earlier Anglo-Saxon cathedral sat to the south of the present cathedral and partly under the present cloisters and partly to the east of the E range; its inclination (as at Winchester Old Minster) was with the axis being in the region of WSW - ENE; an inclination of very approximately 20 degrees (see photograph right). It was in later medieval times overlain by a Lady Chapel (shewn in red) which was, in turn, later demolished. Part of the present cathedral is to the left (north) and marked in grey line.

