

The Isle of Wedmore “1573” Chalices



1573 Protestant Chalice

It has recently been discovered that the four neighbouring parishes on the Isle of Wedmore (Allerton, Badgworth, Mark and Weare) each has a Communion chalice similar to the one illustrated. They are of silver, each hallmarked and stamped with the same date - 1573. The lids are designed so that they can be turned upside down for use as a paten. The Allerton and Mark chalices are identical – about 22 cm high, with a diameter of about 9 cm, the Weare chalice is a little larger and the Badgworth one a little smaller, but both of very similar design.

Each chalice has the maker’s mark of “IP”. The identity of IP is unknown and there are no precise records of silver makers marks prior to 1681, as all records were destroyed in the fire that year at Goldsmiths Hall when the Assay Office was burned down. But he was a known maker of communion cups between 1565 and 1579 and, according to the collections records in the Victoria & Albert Museum,

These chalices date from the early years of the Protestant Reformation in England. Most parish churches in the 1570s would have had a chalice very similar to this. From the 1560s, the church authorities launched a series of reforms to the liturgy, ecclesiastical vestments and procedures, under the direction of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker. Parker had been appointed by Queen Elizabeth 1 on her accession. He fitted her requirements as a respected Anglican theologian, but a moderate man and a good administrator, who could oversee the Protestant innovations of the Church of England with as little disorder as possible. Also, importantly, he has been the private chaplain to Elizabeth’s mother, Anne Boleyn, who, before her execution, had entrusted Elizabeth’s spiritual well-being to Parker, a responsibility he had diligently discharged through Elizabeth’s difficult years before her accession.



Archbishop Matthew Parker

The aim of Parker’s reforms was to return to a simpler, more direct form of worship. In particular, Protestants rejected the Roman Catholic tradition, in which the priest alone took Holy Communion, observed from a distance by the congregation. Instead, the whole congregation partook of the sacrament in a symbolic service of shared communion.

One of the reforms was a programme to replace the 'old massing chalices' with communion cups of prescribed design. One of the most concrete remaining relics of Roman Catholicism in

the local parishes were the chalices and Archbishop Parker thought that where there was a chalice, people would imagine the mass. His Visitation Articles in the diocese of Canterbury in 1569, enquired '*Whether they do minister in any prophane cuppes, bowles, dishes, or chalices heretofore used at masse or els in a decent Communion cuppe provided and kept for the same purpose only*'.



The Coombe Keynes Chalice, a rare surviving example of a pre-Reformation English Chalice

His programme for refashioning old chalices was staggered from diocese to diocese over a period of about 15 years and didn't reach the West Country until the early 1570s. The old medieval chalices and patens were melted down and the silver used for the new communion cups and covers. As far as is known, no records of this process have survived from our parishes, but the process is likely to have been similar to that employed in the parish of Morebath, near Tiverton, where in March 1571 the churchwardens were summoned to bring their chalice before the Royal Commissioners at South Molton: they were required to sell the chalice, for which they got 53/2d, of which the Commissioners took 20/= '*to the quenes mageste use*'.

The programme gave a huge boost to the goldsmiths' trade and led to the establishment of assay offices outside London. Whoever the silversmith "IP" was, he was clearly a significant beneficiary of the process, and it seems likely that he was appointed by the Diocese in some official capacity to supply acceptable new chalices to the parishes that were deemed to need them. Most of the cups that IP produced, like ours, were of a plain design, but he did produce a "better" version such

as one that apparently survives in Middlezoy. Some cups have inscriptions of the names of the people who donated the money for their purchase, but none of ours have anything like this, so one presumes that in poor, backward parishes like those on the Isle of Wedmore in the 1570s, the money must have been raised by public subscription from the parishioners.