

Norman Craftsmanship

Christianity, although well established on Exmoor during the Anglo-Saxon period, has left few physical remains and little evidence of pre-Conquest churches. Part of an Anglo-Saxon cross survives at Porlock, to the north of the study area, whilst Culbone church's simple two-cell plan and possible 11th-century window suggest pre-Norman origins. The early herringbone work at Exton is not easily datable although it, too, suggests the church is among Exmoor's oldest. After the Conquest, there seems to have been much more activity as the parish structure emerged on Exmoor. Although extensive restoration of parish churches in the 19th and 20th centuries has often destroyed or masked early medieval fabric, evidence of post-conquest church building can be found in surviving furnishings. In southern Exmoor seven churches have Norman fonts, a remarkable survival in a relatively small area which may mark the date at which those churches were founded or acquired parochial responsibilities such as baptism.

In general, settlements now cluster around most churches, although Exford stands isolated from the village beside an important axial route across the hills, now the B3224. At Winsford the church was probably built next to the manor house, as is customary in lowland areas. In the Ansteys the two churches were built next to the chief houses of two manors, although at East Anstey not by the most important, whose chapel did not become a parish church. Given the concentration of large estates, it was likely to have been the king or wealthy nobles who built the churches. A great deal of expense would have been incurred not only on the building but also in providing fonts, altars, linen, embroidered vestments, candlesticks, and crosses.

Churches were probably the only substantial stone buildings on Exmoor and would have dominated the landscape. That the origins of churches were important to parishioners is shown in the common practice of preserving Norman south doorways during later rebuilding. At Hawkridge the fine Romanesque doorway indicates that the church was built during this period and at considerable expense. The neighbouring villages of Winsford and Exton have a re-set Norman inner door and a Norman nave respectively, as does the church of St Mary at Molland.

Figure B *Molland's square font has a scalloped edging. Brushford font is also square, but of Purbeck marble, now mounted on a modern cluster of columns. It was possibly given by the de Cartrai family, Domesday tenants of the manor.*



Figure A *Winsford font. The Norman fonts at Brushford, Hawkridge, Molland, Twitchen, West Anstey, Winsford, and Withypool vary in shape and design. They were carved from large blocks of stone and most carry cable or chevron patterns. The square ones may be later but the precise sequence is unknown.*

