

IN THE CONSISTORY COURT OF THE DIOCESE OF LICHFIELD

ST MARY'S ELLESMERE

ON THE PETITION OF THE REVD PREB PAT HAWKINS

JUDGMENT

1. This judgment concerns fonts, for by a petition dated 14 August 2025 a faculty is sought in respect of the following (and I quote the Schedule of Works or Proposals):

To decommission the font introduced by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott at the time of his reconstruction of the nave in 1848/9, but leave it in situ. To introduce a new portable font to enable baptisms to be conducted in full view of the congregation. The Scott font would then be the focus of a welcome and interpretation area in the baptistry. In accordance with the supporting documents included within the submission.

2. St Mary's, Ellesmere is an ancient Grade I Church although, as the Statement of Significance explains, the external appearance is primarily Victorian. Indeed, as indicated above, the Church was the subject of a major George Gilbert Scott restoration carried out in 1848-9.
3. There is a baptistery immediately to the left of the main church entrance, at the western end of the south aisle. The baptistery is a semi-enclosed space by virtue of a wooden screen which was added in 1934, and cannot comfortably contain more than about 25 people. It is this baptistry which contains the Scott font.
4. The Scott font is constructed from carved stone. The font cover is a most elaborate carved wooden structure.
5. The Statement of Significance explains that the present incumbent inherited a practice of using a portable font, which was placed in front of the congregation at baptisms.

Unable to find any evidence that a faculty was obtained in respect of the same, she petitions in order to regularise the situation and to permit the purchase of a more suitable portable font. Indeed, there is a draft minute from a meeting of the PCC held on 14 March 2023 to the effect that neither the baptistery nor the Scott font have been used for baptisms for many years (in view of the size of the former).

6. The primary driver for the petition (which, I note, is unopposed) is stated to be *Pastoral missional and evangelistic*; in summary, there is a desire to conduct baptisms in full and comfortable view of the congregation as opposed to in a crowded baptistery – visibility of which is limited with respect to the main body of the congregation. A secondary factor is in order to create a suitable welcome space with the Scott font at its centre. Additional factors appear to be both a desire to regularise existing practice (as mentioned above) and also some concerns as to the present functionality of the font cover (there being no evidence that the lifting mechanism has been serviced).
7. The matter was been considered by the DAC at a meeting held on 16 July 2025, which recommended approval by this Court. The DAC recognised that the proposal sought to regularise an existing practice, noted the significance of the Scott font but also that it was relatively unusual with its sizeable cover and not easily visible from the main body of the Church (as well as the baptistery being too small for a modern baptism congregation), commended the quality and design of the proposed new portable font, and noted the absence of harm to the fabric of the Church.
8. It is noted in Mark Hill, *Ecclesiastical Law* (4th edn, 2018) at 7.118 that (footnotes omitted):

Canon law provides that every church where baptism is to be administered must be provided with a decent font, with a cover to keep it clean. The font must stand as near to the principal entrance as it conveniently may be, save where there is an established custom to the contrary or where the Ordinary otherwise directs. The strict rigour of the canon has been tempered by a House of Bishops statement regarding the liturgical appropriateness of the position of fonts. There does not appear to be any canon or rule of law which prevents there being more than one font in a church, although one is

considered to be the norm. Designs for fonts which allow for baptism to be administered in a number of ways are encouraged.

9. Canon F1 (cited in support of the first and second sentences above) states as follows:

1. In every church and chapel where baptism is to be administered, there shall be provided a decent font with a cover for the keeping clean thereof.

2. The font shall stand as near to the principal entrance as conveniently may be, except there be a custom to the contrary or the Ordinary otherwise direct; and shall be set in as spacious and well-ordered surroundings as possible.

3. The font bowl shall only be used for the water at the administration of Holy Baptism and for no other purpose whatsoever.

10. There are a considerable number of judgments concerning fonts, a great many of which concern petitions either to relocate or to replace. A notable example from the case law is *Re Holy Trinity Church, Wandsworth* (2012) 15 EccLJ 126, a magisterial judgment of Petchey Ch which (at paragraph 30) makes the not unimportant observation that in the earliest days of Christianity there were no church buildings and baptism took place in rivers or any convenient piece of water.

11. I also note from the judgment that:

- a. The proposition that the font should be near the principal entrance is one having considerable weight (para 63);
- b. It may be permissible for the font to be situated elsewhere in *exceptional circumstances* (para 68), which means something of the ordinary (para 71);
- c. In practice the Canon is not straightforward to apply bearing in mind that there may be almost an inherent inconvenience of having a font by the door (para 75 - 6).

12. In the context of fonts, this is a relatively unusual petition in that the petition simply seeks the decommissioning of the Scott font and not its relocation or removal. It also, of course, seeks the introduction of a new portable font.

13. The petitioner is to be commended for seeking to regularise the position. She is also to be commended for drawing attention to the *Response by the House of Bishops to Questions Raised by Diocesan Chancellors* (June 1992).
14. It seems to me that the case for granting a faculty in respect of a replacement portable font is made out bearing in mind:
- a. There is a long-established custom in this Church of using a portable font other than by the main entrance;
 - b. The nature and size of the baptistery make use of the Scott font problematic both in terms of the numbers of people it can accommodate and also lack of visibility (from the rest of the Church);
 - c. The Scott font itself has a cover which, although very fine, renders the font relatively unusable (as noted by the DAC);
 - d. The proposal provides for a *decent font*, the quality and design of which have been commended by the DAC;
 - e. The primary justification for the petition, specifically so that baptisms can be conducted in the full and comfortable view of the congregation. The petitioner wishes to ensure that the baptism is an engaging and accessible presentation of the Christian faith; that is to be encouraged.
15. I am rather more doubtful whether a faculty should be given *to decommission* the Scott font if indeed that is possible bearing in mind that it is not proposed to do anything of a physical nature to it. It is more desirable in my judgment simply to grant the faculty in respect of the portable font, whilst recognising that on a day to day basis the Scott font will not be used (at least by the current incumbent). I should add that, as a condition, I will direct that the Scott font is to be retained *in situ* and maintained as to its integrity (font and cover).

**CHRISTOPHER BUCKINGHAM
DEPUTY CHANCELLOR
21 OCTOBER 2025**