

Gazette helps find £100,000 treasure taken from church.

By Kathy Canham

A PRECIOUS font stolen from a tiny village church has been safely recovered after narrowly escaping being converted into a sundial.

Parishoners of **St Peter's Church** in Little Warley feared their marble font, which dates back to the time of Oliver Cromwell was lost for ever when it was stolen in a sneak raid.

But their prayers were answered thanks to a Brentwood resident, an antique dealer... and the Gazette.

Antique dealer **Richard Barking**, who runs **Haybarn Antiques at Battlesbridge Centre**, near Wickford, bought the font in good faith from a man claiming to be a landscape gardener.

Experts believe the font which is valued at £30,000, could have been worth in excess of £100,000 to a specialist overseas collector.

Mr Barker who is disabled, said: "The man told me it was from a garden he had been clearing. I bought it as a nice birdbath. It didn't look anything like a font to me. I liked the stand. I paid him £125. I was going to turn it into a sundial. " The 36 year-old former plasterer from Rayleigh left the font on display in his shop where it was spotted by an eagle-eyed Brentwood resident who had read the Gazette's front page coverage of the burglary in early February.

Mr Barker said: "He told me he thought it looked the same as the stolen font in the paper. So I came to Brentwood Library and had a

**£100,000 font
plundered in
church raid**

How the Gazette reported the robbery in Little Warley on February 7

good look at the photo in the Gazette. Then I phoned the police. "

The font is now in safe keeping at **South Woodham Ferrers police station** and could be restored to its rightful place in St Peters within a month once new security measures have been taken.

Joint churchwarden David Tee said: "We are absolutely over the moon. There is slight damage as the top part seems to have come loose from the base.

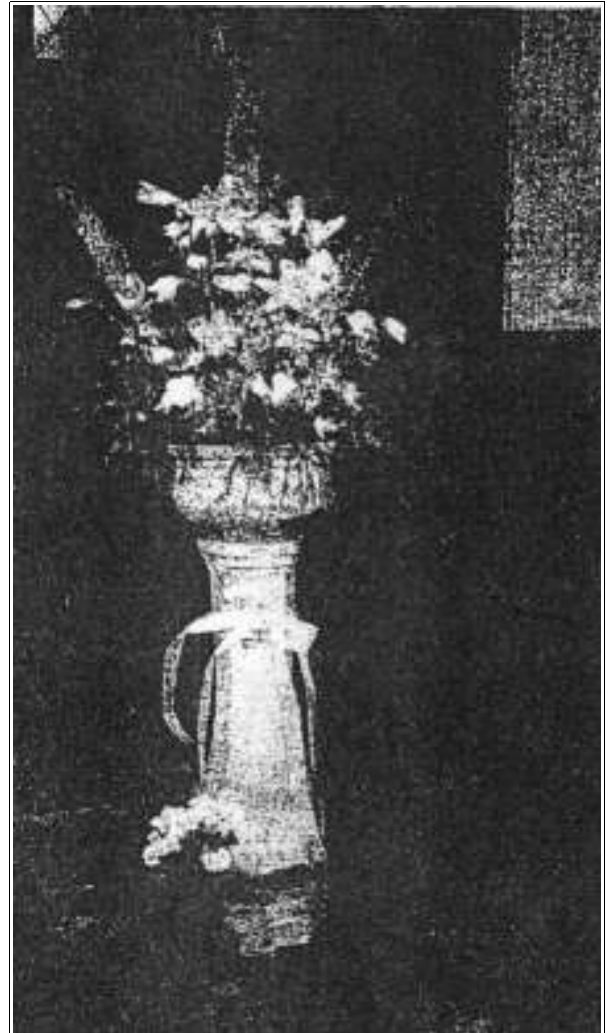
"I never thought in my wildest dreams that we would have see the font again. We thought it had gone as a garden ornament or been stolen to order. We are euphoric. "

Sgt Piers Quinnell, of **Brentwood Police**, said "An antique dealer in Battlesbridge bought the font. It was bought to his attention that it might be the stolen font reported in the newspaper. Police wish to thank the Gazette for their assistance. " Police have issued a description of the man who sold the font on Sunday, February 17. He is described as white, of medium build, about 5ft 10ins with short, light brown, ginger hair. He was wearing glasses and drove a White Ford Escort van.

Other precious artifacts stolen in the raid have still to be recovered and police are appealing for people to be on the lookout. The valuables include two 1901 brass candlesticks valued at £400, a matching brass cross valued at £250, a portable brass lectern valued at £300 and a full size wooden lectern, complete with reading light estimated to be worth £500.

Fox 121 Security Ltd – specialists in security and surveillance – offered a £100,000 reward after being moved by the plight of the church. Anyone with information should call **Brentwood police on 01277 262212.**

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RECOVERED: The ancient font (above) which was stolen from St Peter's Church, Little Warley in February.

RIGHT: Antique dealer Richard Barker, who phoned the police after being tipped off that the font was stolen.

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