YCCCART 2021/Y6

The Old Stone Crosses of Bleadon, Loxton and Compton Bishop

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Graffito on jamb of Loxton church porch door

Page	Contents
3	Abstract Acknowledgements Introduction
4	Site location Land use and geology
8	Historical & archaeological context
12	Survey objectives Methodology
13	Results
33	Recommendations References

Abstract

This report was intended to tell the story of several very different crosses in three contiguous, but very different, south Mendip parishes. There seems (not only in this report, but everywhere in Somerset) no overall relationship (other than the limited case of covered market crosses in towns) between wealth of a settlement and the size and / or complexity of its crosses.

Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr Charles Pooley, for having published 'The Old Stone Crosses of Somerset' in 1877, which encouraged my interest in the subject in the 1970s. Also to the anonymous 'CND' who took so many photographs of crosses from 1955-65, and deposited them in the Somerset Heritage Centre.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCCART) is one of a number of Community Archaeology teams across northern Somerset, formerly supported by the North Somerset Council Development Management Team.

Our objective is to undertake archaeological fieldwork to enable a better understanding and management of the heritage of the area while recording and publishing the activities and locations of the research carried out.

Site location



Fig 1: Location of Bleadon 1 and 2

Bleadon 1 (which can be clearly seen in Fig 1) stands on an area of grass next to the (unnamed) church drive, off Coronation Road in Bleadon. It is at ST3411056921. Bleadon 2 is in its original position in the parish church of SS Peter and Paul, at ST3413956902.

Land use and geology

Both sites lie on the Mercia Mudstones of the south-facing Mendip scarp. Bleadon 1 is a Listed Building (Grade II), and readily open to the public: Bleadon 2 is part of the Grade I Listed parish church, and available when the parish church is open.

Location



Fig 2: Location of Loxton 1

Loxton 1 (the churchyard cross) stands south of Loxton parish church of St Andrew at ST3762255810. The churchyard lies off Church Lane.

Land use and geology

Church and cross lie on the Dolomitic Conglomerate. The cross (a Scheduled Monument and a Grade II Listed Building) is in a churchyard open to the general public. The site lies within the Loxton Conservation area and the Mendip Hills AONB.

Location



Fig 3: Location of Compton Bishop 1



Fig 4: Location of Compton Bishop 2

Compton Bishop 1 is the churchyard cross at the parish church of St Andrew, Compton Bishop. It stands at ST3959955378, south of the church. It is a Grade II* Listed Building.

The reputed Compton Bishop 2 stood at ST4118254764, the junction of Old Coach Road with Webbington Road, in the hamlet of Cross.

Land use and geology

Compton Bishop 1 stands on the Mercia Mudstones, in the bottom of the south-east facing combe that gives the village its name. It is in a churchyard open to the public.

The site of Compton Bishop 2 is on the junction of Head deposits and the peats that form Cross Moor to the south-east. The site lies in a public highway.

Historical & archaeological context

These three contiguous Mendip parishes have settlements that are quite different in character today.

Bleadon parish is centred on Bleadon, a middling-sized nucleated village, busy and in some parts adjacent to the main A370, the Weston-super-Mare to Bridgwater road. The church and crosses are in the centre of the village.

Loxton is a much smaller, but also nucleated village. The church and cross lie on the edge of the village in the Lox Yeo Valley.

Compton Bishop is an area of dispersed settlement, and appears to have always been so, the closest thing to a village in the parish being Cross in the eastern part of the parish. Compton Bishop church is above the settlement.

Medieval stone crosses were a fashionable subject of antiquarian enquiry from the mid 19th century, when Pooley was studying those of Gloucestershire (Pooley 1868) and Somerset (Pooley 1877). Some of the latest work on a whole county was that of Watkins on the crosses of Herefordshire (Watkins 1930). Sequences of reports on other counties have been published, but few have recently been examined using modern archaeological techniques.

Some of the larger and more 'romantick' (i.e. ruinous) were recorded from the late 18th century by antiquarians, and it is by their fortunate attention to the structures that we know of the appearance of (say) Taunton, Axbridge or Bridgwater market crosses, but illustrations of churchyard and other crosses were much rarer.

Bleadon 1, presumably because of its proximity to a road, has been the subject of many photographs and post cards. Both Loxton and Compton Bishop churches and crosses are sufficiently off the beaten track to have not attracted such attention

The lack of recent academic study of these structures means that most of the ideas surrounding their construction and use (such as the strange persistence of belief in their being earlier than the church which they serve, which they almost never are) are 19th century in origin, and reflect the academic standards and ideas of that period.

The 'Old Stone Crosses of Somerset' was written and published in the late 19th century (officially in 1877, although his research seems to have been carried out during the previous decade) by Dr Charles Pooley.

Pooley was a doctor at the Weston Sanatorium (now the 'Royal Sands' on Weston-super-Mare sea front) and lived in Raglan Crescent in Weston. He spent much of the 1860s and '70s travelling the lanes and byways of Somerset seeking out these fascinating monuments in churchyards, by waysides, in village centres, on parish or manorial boundaries, over springs: he chatted with the local vicars and rectors, many of whom studied antiquities in their often remote parishes, where often they might be the only well-

educated person in the place.

His documentary study seems, by today's standards, very slight, although to be fair his book was never intended as anything but 'notes', and he did achieve his plan, which was to make people far more aware of these structures, and to make certain they were better conserved, and in this, he largely succeeded.

Pooley retired to Cheltenham not long after the publication of his book, and a saddening letter now bound into the copy of the Old Stone Crosses in Nailsea library reveals that at the end of his life, he was completely blind.

The name 'stone cross' covers a multitude of sins (if you'll pardon the phrase): it can mean anything from a crude cross cut into a natural boulder (there is one on the border of the parishes of Culbone and Porlock, in far Exmoor) to a large complex building erected for a market shelter (such as that in the market place at Cheddar).

The medieval form of cross, which broadly speaking consists of a set of steps, a socket and a shaft (all broadly, but not strictly, radially symmetric), supporting and displaying a small carved head with crucifixion and other scenes, is universal throughout the surviving Somerset crosses (with the exception of the special category of market crosses, which also incorporate a shelter over the steps - still radially symmetric, however).

The heads usually depicted a crucifixion scene on one side, and a second scene, often of the BVM holding the child Christ, on the other. The more ornate often also included figures on each side of the head as well, often figures of a knight and / or bishop.

Because of the religious symbolism of the carved heads, these were ruthlessly destroyed in the iconoclastic times of the Reformation and 17th century civil war. This was carried out so thoroughly that only four survive on their shafts in Somerset – Stringston and Spaxton near Bridgwater, Wedmore and Chewton Mendip. Pooley identified several heads or fragments of heads surviving elsewhere, and my research has raised this total to about 20.

Churchyards crosses are built for complex, inter-related reasons, but briefly, these seem to be

- 1 As a common memorial to all the dead of the churchyard
- 2 As a gathering point for the spreading of news and proclamations
- 3 As the last site of common celebration on the procession around the parish on Palm Sunday (Russett, in prep).

The crosses in churchyards are certainly always connected in the public mind with preaching: at Craswell and Llanveynoe in Herefordshire, Watkins (1930) recorded seats constructed outside the church, apparently for the use of congregations listening to preaching at crosses. Such seats exist at Spaxton and Glastonbury. This seems to have been unusual, and presumably other congregations stood (or maybe just sat on the grass). This was clearly the case with other crosses, such as that in Iron Acton churchyard

in South Gloucestershire, where a small railed space is provided for the accommodation of the preacher.

One main function of the churchyard cross, however, seems to have been as the final station on the Palm Sunday procession before re-entering the church (see Watkins 1930, for a discussion of this). The result of such use is that many of the crosses have (and others presumably once had) affixes or drill holes or other features facing the church path, and which would have been used to hold decorations and possibly the pyx on Palm Sunday. Such a use is remembered in the name Yew Cross at Wookey. Unfortunately, since that cross was 'restored' in 1905 (Brass tablet in Wookey church) the socket is the only pre-20th century stone surviving. This also implies that the cross was very likely to have originally been sited beside the path to the church door in use in the medieval period, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the south door. Fieldwork indicates that it is almost always sited (when in its original position) to the right of the path as the door is approached. This may imply that churchyard crosses not in this position have been moved at some time - this is certainly the case with Orchard Portman, where contemporary drawings during the 1840s document the move. In other cases, the path may have moved away from the cross, although this seems to be less likely to happen often.

Village crosses ('market crosses') are rather more simple to understand, largely being central to trade and exchange (both of goods, and of information and news) in the village.

Many crosses acting as market crosses have an interesting relationship to their market place, and to events there. Both sheltered and open crosses are frequently seen as sites for the sale of small produce, or where stalls can be erected. Frequently, and especially just beyond living memory, they were perceived as the appropriate place for market women to sit, (as opposed to the men who walked around the market trading livestock) and the frequency of the occurrence of the name 'Butter Cross' (supplemented by several occasions where name and records imply the existence of a cheese market) imply that the market function of crosses may have been seen as a domestic / female / enclosed role, as opposed to the agricultural / male / open role of the rest of the market. This is a large subject, and one that might be investigated further. In this context, it is interesting to see a letter of Sir Edward Hext of Low Ham to Ralph Rixdon, vicar of Kingsdon, in 1615, concerning Somerton market cross, and which includes the lines:

"...but also will (at myne owne Chardge) build a fayre Crosse, that the people maye sytt drye to sell their butter, Cheese, Appells, oatemeale, Cabbage, rootes and other such thinges, as are solde at a Crosse..." (Berry 1992: 110)

Time and again, the relationship of village crosses, High Crosses and crosses in suburbs of towns like Wells to markets is unmistakable (examples can be found in Wells, Frome, or Taunton). Presumably, the erection of a market cross would be part of the equipping of a market place, as would the erection of shambles, or allocation of places for stalls.

During the period of the Reformation, a practice known as 'Creeping to the cross' was at first supported by King Henry VIII in 1539, then in 1546, Archbishop Cranmer drafted an edict (which the King never signed) for the banning of the practice along with other major

religious festivals. After Lord Protector Somerset's edict for the destruction of all shrines and pictures of saints in July 1547, the blessing of foliage on Palm Sunday and 'Creeping to the Cross' were both banned in February 1548.

The 1643 'Ordinance for the utter demolishing, removing and taking away of all Monuments of Superstition or Idolatry' marked the beginning of a systematic attack on the remaining crosses that had survived the Reformation (http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/acts-ordinances-interregnum/pp425-426) (recovered 13 January 2017).

Some public resistance to these two periods of destruction can be seen in the hiding of cross heads in the fabric of churches, where they have subsequently been found during works to the churches (as at Berrow and Tellisford, for example).

A few crosses, of course, have been moved into churchyards to protect them from destruction (such as Bishops Lydeard): others have made the opposite journey (Evercreech, for example), while some have dodged about the village (such as Meare), and in these cases, their original function cannot be readily assumed. Further discussion of origins and meanings of crosses are in (Russett *in prep*).

Survey objectives

This report was intended to introduce the concept that three sets of crosses in adjacent south west Mendip parishes could vary so much in form, and presumably, function. At least two of the churchyards containing them (Loxton and Compton Bishop) appear to be almost unknown and have few visitors.

Methodology

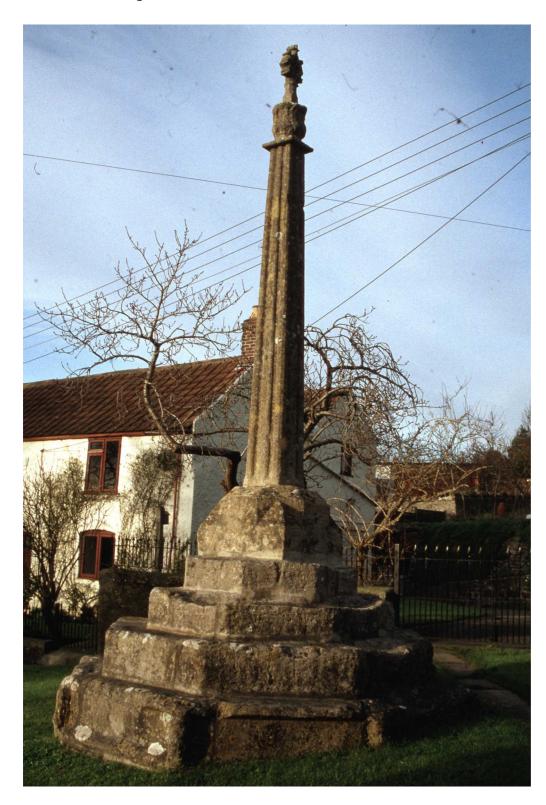
This report has been compiled with fieldwork dating from 1973 to the present day. For objects presumably once of great importance to village life, it is surprising how few documentary references to these monuments exist.

The report was written in Libre Office 5 Writer.

Photographs were taken by members of YCCCART, and remain the copyright of YCCCART.

Results

Bleadon 1: 'Village' cross



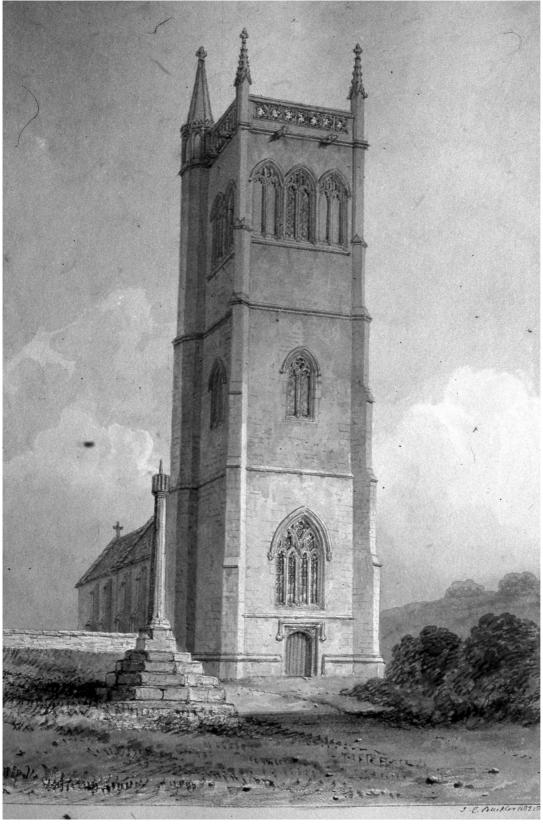
The word village is included here in inverted commas because there is a persistent rumour that the cross was once in the churchyard, but '..in an open space, formerly included in the precincts of the churchyard, but which of late years has been walled off and become part of the thoroughfare of the village..' (Pooley 1877: 66).

If this was so, it certainly happened before 1828 (Fig 6) (hardly 'of late years' in 1877).

This is confirmed by the Tithe Map of 1843.

Fig 5: Bleadon 1: 'Village' cross

This is accepted as fact by Historic England in their List Description of the cross (see below).



Note the churchyard wall already in place in **Buckler's** drawing of 1828.

All elements of the cross look familiar, up until the top of the socket, but the shaft is clearly not the Classical structure seen today: there is some evidence (see below) that it was originally an octagonal shaft with pyramidal stops of typically late medieval type. At the top of the shaft, the abacus (structure supporting the head of the cross) seems to be the modern one.

Fig 6: Bleadon 1 by J C Buckler (1828)

Above this is a curious object seen in many early 19th century illustrations of crosses, an iron spike presumably once supporting the former carved head. This probably played a part in events to follow.

All evidence seems to be (Pooley 1877: 66; Hickley nd) that the cross was struck by lightning in a storm in 1832, and the shaft demolished. The iron spike would have formed a perfect site for a leader strike. It is curious that the abacus seems to have survived the strike (and even more strange that it was replaced in the new construction).

A clue to the previous appearance of the cross is given in Pooley, where he illustrates (Fig 7) and object referred to as 'the hitching-stone' since an iron hook set into it sufficed for the hitching of horses. This appears to be the base of the demolished cross shaft.



Fig 7: The 'hitch-stone' from Pooley (1877)

This stone had a curious later story: a later vicar found it had disappeared, but he found it, and put it in the church, where it was in 1929: by 1966, when the OS archaeologists looked for it, it had disappeared again.

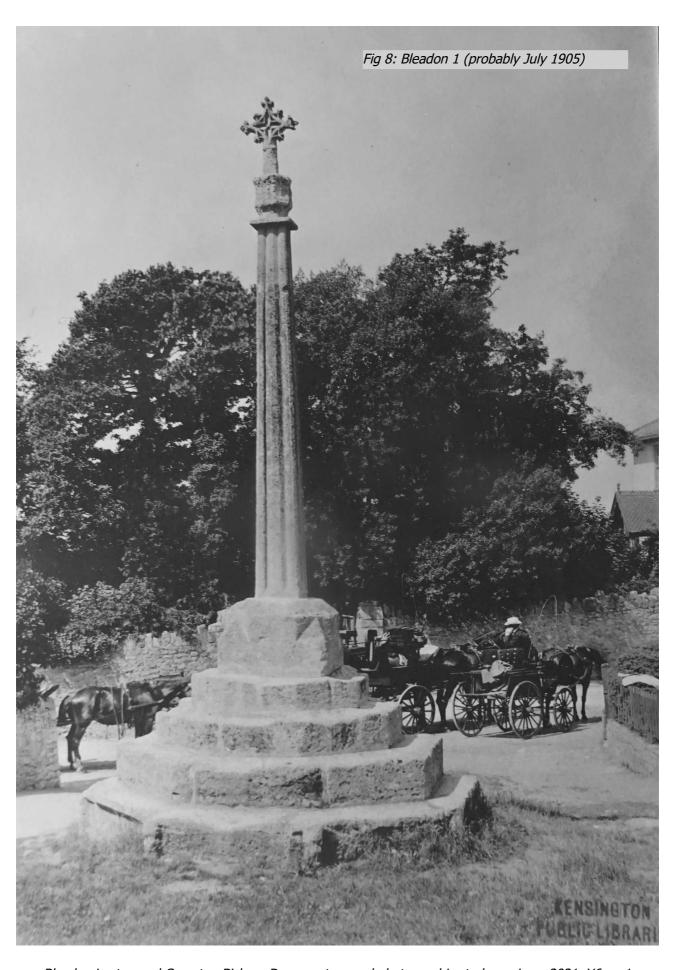
No source seems willing to give the exact date of repairs, but after further vandal damage, it was 'restored' by the Rev. Robert Lawrence, who was presumably reposible for the choice of the pseudo-Classical shaft and entablature. The floriated head of the cross once had two projecting arms, of which the south was lost before 1919, and the north before 1955-65 (postcards in VJR collection: SHC DD/X/CND).

The modern structure is a Grade II Listed Building (LEN1129063), whose List description reads:

'Cross, probably formerly within churchyard. Late medieval, seventeenth century / eighteenth century shaft, nineteenth century and twentieth century restorations. Freestone. An octagonal calvary of four steps rises to a square socket which is chamfered to an octagon above; a fluted, square shaft tapers to a flat cap; the finial has an octagonal base with worn panels and a floreate cross (restored) above.'

The position of the structure has led to some picturesque photographs, such as that in Fig 8.

I wonder if this photograph was taken during a visit to Bleadon church by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, who visited Bleadon on July 19th 1905, and we are specifically told that they *'inspected the Cross'* (PSANHS 1906 Annual Meeting 1905: 33). Perhaps surprisingly, Bleadon does not have a Conservation Area: the cross is protected by its Listed status.



Bleadon Loxton and Compton Bishop, Documentary and photographic study, various, 2021, Y6, v. 1

The cross is only in average condition: Fig 9 below shows what appear to be concrete repairs, and in the upper centre of the side facing the road, a possible concrete-plugged hole for an affix.



Fig 9: Socket of Bleadon 1 (1992)



Fig 10: The late medieval abacus

The survival of the medieval abacus (especially in an early 19th century 'restoration') is little short of miraculous. A few others are known (at say, Cheddar or West Pennard), but precious few survive from medieval Somerset.

Bleadon 2: Church Porch cross

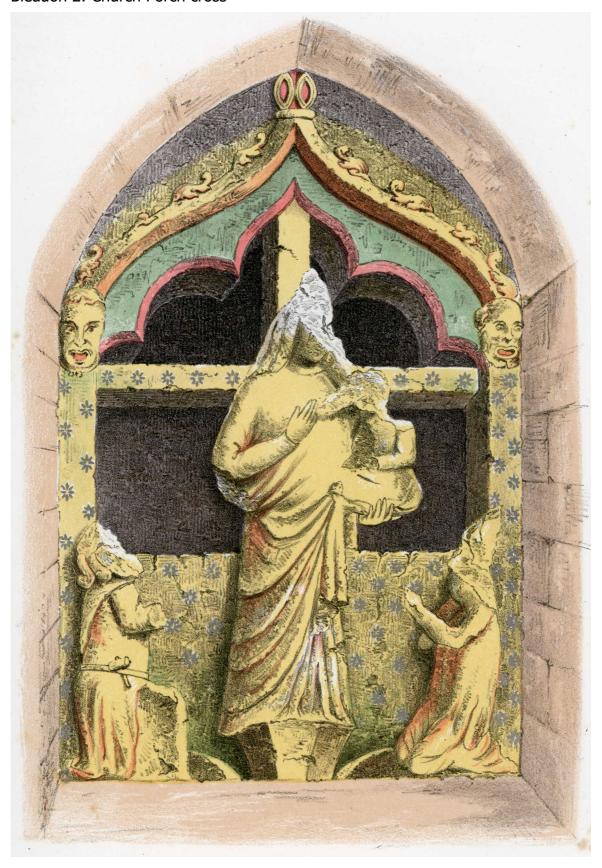


Fig 11: Bleadon 2: Cross in church porch by WM Pooley (1877)

According to Pooley (1877: 67),

Porch Cross. -A discovery of no ordinary interest was made a few years ago, during the restoration of the church. On removing the plaster from the east wall of the porch, the workmen exposed to view a canopied niche containing sculpture. The niche is formed of a five-centred arch, beneath an ogee moulding that springs from corbel heads. Occupying the centre position, and standing on a pedestal in front of a Cross, is the figure of the Virgin, carrying the Holy Child on her left arm; she wears a close-fitting vest, as well as an ample robe, which, falling under her right arm, is gathered up in graceful folds to the left side. Although the head is much broken, she appears to have been crowned.

At her feet are two figures, one on either side, in the attitude of adoration. That on the right, habited as a Franciscan, with the cowl thrown back, is kneeling on one knee, and from the emblem of his trade, a hammer stuck in his girdle, may be taken to represent Joseph 'the Carpenter,' an instance of one of those medieval solecisms, of which so many are to be found in ancient religious art.

The other is that of a young person kneeling on both knees, but the head and other parts are so injured as to make the figure unintelligible. The noticeable points of this group are to be found in the art exaltation of the canonised Virgin and Child in front of the Cross, and the circumstance of the adoration of her own husband, presuming the figure to be such. It will be seen, however, that the Cross is not a 'Cross of Shame,' but a 'Cross of Glory,' being powdered with silver stars, which, though almost obliterated in the original, I have restored in the plate.

The remains of colouring, vermilion, yellow, and green, originally perhaps blue over the yellow, are also visible on the figures and mouldings.

This curious work of art was mutilated in the process of removing the mortar, and the fragments broken off, which were preserved for some time, are now lost.

The niche measures 30 in. in height, by 20 in. in width, and the upper part of the block in which the group is cut, is pierced. Early Fifteenth century

Although inclined at one time to think this the head of a standing cross, I am now certain it is not (and to be fair, Pooley never claimed it as such). However, when the stone is examined, it is clearly designed to fit in a niche in the porch, and is similar to those carvings known at Axbridge and Weston-super-Mare.

Pooley was so impresed with the colours he saw, that he included a colour lithograph (Fig 11) - it was the only one in his book.

The colours have faded since exposure - certainly, when I first photographed this structure in 1974, they were not detectable to the naked eye (Fig 12 below).

Extreme processing with Photoshop did reveal some traces of Pooley's colours, but most had faded beyond recall.



Fig 12: Bleadon porch cross (1974)

Loxton 1 (churchyard cross)



Fig 13: Loxton 1: Churchyard Cross



Fig 14: Loxton 1 (churchyard cross) by Buckler (1828)

Bucklers drawing of 1828 shows some detail of the churchyard cross, although Fig 14 is extracted from a drawing of the church, so this lack should not be surprising. It is not until Pooley's drawing of 1877 then anything like an accurate image of the site is made. He discusses the statement by Collinson (1793 (3): 605) that the cross has five steps; Pooley saw three, and it is clear on the ground today, that since the basement of the cross can clearly be seen as a narrow crop mark in dry seasons, below the bottom step, that there were probably always three steps.

The cross's appearance changed during the early 20th century, when Henry F Tiarks paid for the restoration, and erection of a new canopied head in 1910 (Knight 1915: 311-312).

Fortunately, a number of photographs survive of the cross before this was carried out (see below (fig 15).

The first (of c1900) (below) shows the cross in the same headless state as when seen by Pooley in the 1860s.



Fig 15: Loxton 1 in c1900 (from the Frederick Wood collection)

Just to confirm, there had been no restoration at this date, the shaft of the cross still broken.

However, an intriguing note is struck by Fig 16 (below), which shows there had been the addition of an cross to the stump of the shaft by 1910 (please forgive the poor quality of the image: this is taken from the edge of a picture postcard of Loxton church posted in 1910 in VR collection).

This appears to show an equal-armed cross set on the squared-off top of the old shaft, which work must have been done between 1900 and 1910, by a person or persons unknown (there is no faculty for the work, for example).

I can find no record of this work anywhere: the social importance of the Tiarks family seems to have led to this stage being forgotten.

There seems to be no record of this very temporary cross-head, although it my have been taken into the church.

Against this, it has to be said that the work paid for by the Tiarks is of outstanding quality (see images below).



Fig 16: The 'interim' head of Loxton 1 (from post card posted in 1910)

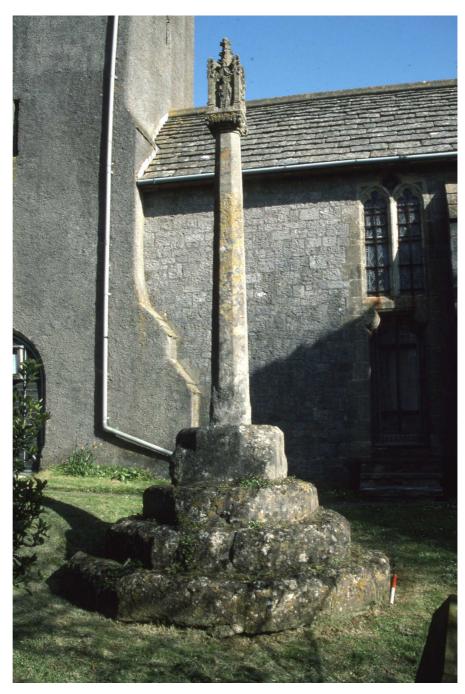


Fig 17 : Loxton 1 from the south

The cross today is in reasonably good condition: the Tiarks works still stand out, although carried out more than 110 years ago.

The cross is both a Scheduled Monument (LEN1015514) and a Grade II Listed Building (LEN 1129803).

It is within the curtilage of the Grade II^* Listed St Andrews church.

Carving in church porch



Fig 18: Carving (?graffito) in Loxton church porch

The above carving (about 15cm high) is on the door jamb of Loxton church porch. It seems to show a wheel-headed cross with tapering shaft, surrounded by two concentric circles. The cross is not centred within them.

Its origins and meaning are obscure: it is clearly no idle scribble, though, and would have taken some time.

Seeing that some local church porches have images of crucufixions in them, could this be a rustic attempt to provide something similar for the porch at St Andrew's, Loxton?

Wheel headed crosses are almost unknown in Somerset (although one was excavated on Glastonbury Tor in 1964) (Rahtz 1970), and they became popular again in the 19th century, leading to some hideous 'restorations' of medieval crosses at that time).

They are, of course, extremely common in Cornwall, Scotland and Ireland.

Compton Bishop 1 (churchyard cross)



Fig 19: Compton Bishop 1 (2016)

This cross has an extraordinary structure, detailed below. There was also folklore that '..a Cavalier was killed on the steps of the cross during the war..' (pers comm, 1968).

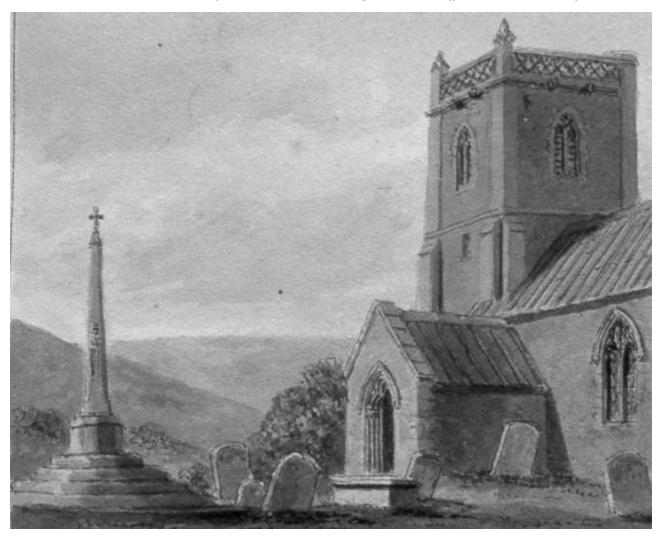


Fig 20: Compton Bishop 1 by J C Buckler (1844)

While Buckler's drawing of the cross is not particularly accurate (showing, for example the square present and original socket as an octagon more like that at Cheddar), he does illustrate the presence of carving on the shaft, and shows a small equal-armed cross on top of it.

However, by the time Pooley came to record the cross, the earlier head recorded by Buckler had been replaced with a floriated finial remarkably similar to that of Bleadon 1. The resemblance is so marked that they may well have been commissioned from one firm or individual.

Pooleys slightly muddled description does however include the fact that the floriated head was added 'about 30 years ago'. a drawing dated 1843 shows the floriated head already in place, so the work must have been accomplished around that date.

One of Pooley's assertions is that the cross formerly had six steps '.. but these have been

reduced to four..'. This same story is told of many crosses (Congresbury 1 is a good example: YCCCART were firmly told that apart from the four visible steps in this village cross, two more had been buried by the raising of the surrounding road: we were able to demonstrate by excavation that this was not true: see excavation report on this web site).

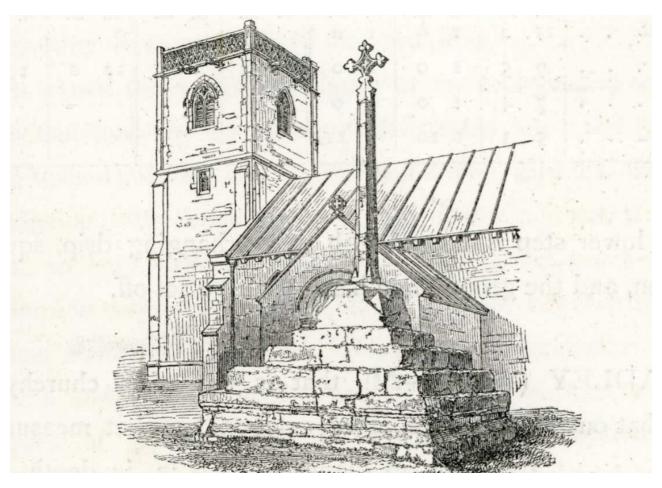


Fig 21: Compton Bishop 1 by Pooley (1877)

The floriated cross was still in place in 1955-65 (SHC DD/X/CND), but by the time I first photographed it in 1973, the head had gone, and the familiar sight of an iron peg projecting from the top of the cross shaft was all that remained to show it had been there.

Further notes by Pooley indicate the complexity of this cross.

'The socket is notable for its massiveness and the bold sweep of its broaches. Its top face is deeply bevelled, the bevelling being stopped in the centre of each side by a groove and drill-hole, wherein was probably inserted an iron support for sculpture. Close beneath each broach is a deep notch, which effects a break in the angular outline of the socket. The shaft is a fine octagonal monolith, which retains, on its north-west and south-east faces, the remains of carved weathercrockets and finials, and drill-holes in its upper and lower part.'

(Pooley 1877: 47-48)

This complicated description is illustrated below.



Fig 22: West side of the cross socket (2016)



Fig 23: View across the top of the socket (2016)

Fig 22 shows both the 'bold sweep of the broaches' (a type I have never seen elsewhere in the counties of Somerset, Gloucestershire or Wiltshire). Beneath each broach (on each corner of the socket) is a second unique feature, the semi-circular notch near the base.

Fig 23, a top view of the socket shows the variety of drill holes, notches and gaps where plugs for affixes have been removed.

The gaps half-way along each top face might well be regarded as resulting from the removal of affixes (Kingston Seymour village cross socket has something similar). These are presumably original and of late medieval date, their loss presumably during the 17th century. The other drill holes could be of any date.



Fig 24: the shaft carvings (2016)

Also unusual are the carvings on two opposite sides of the octagonal shaft (Fig 24).

These are now extremely worn, and I can't really add to Pooley's '..carved weathercrockets and finials..'

These were presumably intended to contain human figures, but these would have been extremely vulnerable after the Reformation.

There some similar features on other crosses (Crowcombe churchyard cross immediately comes to mind). The final indignity to which this cross has been subjected is damage caused by implement sharpening (probably during grass-cutting in the churchyard).

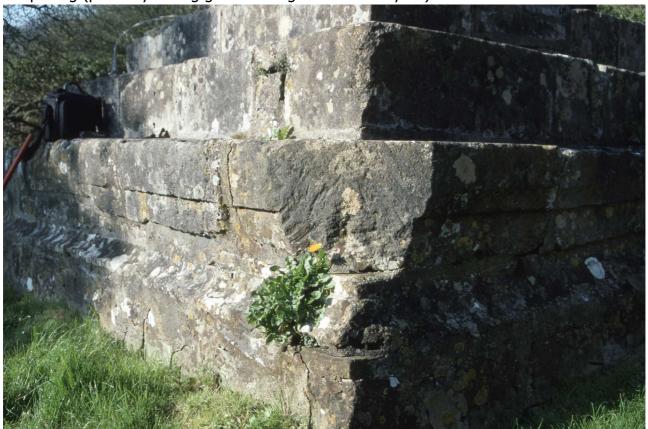


Fig 25: Sharpening marks on the corner of the lowest step

These are not unusual (there is a notorious example at Dundry churchyard).

This is a complex (and probably expensive!) cross for such a small settlement, and I can only assume that it is somehow related to the ownership of the parish by the diocese during the medieval period, with access to the necessary funds and skillsets to create such a cross.

Compton Bishop 2

There is persistent folklore to this day that a cross once stood in Cross, at the junction of roads where the former turnpike gate stood.

There is certainly nothing at the site today, and I can only assume that the folk imagination has been at work with the name of the settlement.

Recommendations for further work

It might be worth checking the churchyard at Bleadon in winter conditions to check if the 'hitching-post' still remains there.

A 3-D scan of the church porch cross at Bleadon which could be then coloured according to Pooley's description would be a useful educational tool.

Both the church porch carving at Loxton and the details of Compton Bishop 1 would repay recording with lighting rigs for illustration with different glancing lights.

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Date

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