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**The Old Stone Crosses of Yatton: historical and photographic study  
YATTON, CONGRESBURY, CLAVERHAM AND CLEEVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH TEAM (YCCART)**

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*Yatton church and cross 1826, from the Piggott collection, SANHS*

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## **Abstract**

*The cross in the churchyard at Yatton has been recorded on many occasions by numerous antiquarians, chiefly Dr Charles Pooley in the 1860s and 1870s. These structures have not been examined with modern archaeological techniques, however, and these may cast a new light on some of the more esoteric aspects of these structures. A few other records relating to crosses in other parts of the old parish of Yatton are also pursued, but these now all seem to be missing.*

## **Acknowledgements**

YCCCART are most grateful to Yatton Parish Council and St Mary the Virgin's church, Yatton for access to the churchyard cross – the other sites are on private and inaccessible property.

## **Introduction**

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

The objective of the Community Archaeology in North Somerset (CANS) teams is to carry out archaeological fieldwork, for the purpose of recording, and better understanding, of the heritage of North Somerset.

The fieldwork for this report has been carried out with repeated visits by the author since 1974

For further information on CANS, see <http://cansnetwork.co.uk>

## Site locations



*Fig 1: Location of Yatton churchyard cross*

Yatton churchyard cross is located 6m S of the south door of the parish church of St Mary the Virgin, Yatton, in North Somerset. Yatton is approximately 16km south-west of the city of Bristol, at ST43136539. It stands on the east side of the path connecting the south door of the church and the Old Rectory to the south.

### **Land use and geology**

The site lies on the periglacial Head deposits, overlying the Mercia Mudstones. Current land use is as an active burial ground, although the part of the churchyard where the cross stands has not been used for burials for well over a century.



*Fig 2: Sites of Court de Wyck cross and Stalling's Cross*

The site of Stalling's cross is not completely clear, but Pooley described it as 'on the site of the chapel of the Primitive Methodists'. This is now a private dwelling (2 Chapel Lane) to the SE of Claverham cross-roads, in Claverham, at approximately ST44676610. It is the western site shown above.

The site of the 'cross at Court de Wyck' was in the yard of the manorial complex now largely built over with a factory. It's site is known with less precision, but was approximately at ST44856621, on the eastern side of the village of Claverham. It is the eastern site shown above.

Claverham is in the parish of Yatton in North Somerset, 14.5km south west of the city of Bristol.

### **Land use and geology**

The sites lie on the periglacial Head deposits, overlying the Mercia Mudstones. The western site is now occupied by a chapel converted to a private dwelling. The eastern lies beneath the car park of a factory. Neither is open to the public.

## Historical and archaeological context

Medieval stone crosses were a fashionable subject of antiquarian enquiry from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

Yatton churchyard cross has featured on several occasions in county-wide recordings, such as those in the Braikenridge collection in the archives of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, and has featured in a number of post cards and other illustrative material (e. g. Tozer 1989).

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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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, 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 huge 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 (including potentially one at Yatton, but we'll come to that later).

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 other 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. 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.

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. 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)

### Yatton churchyard cross

Yatton churchyard cross is a fine example of it's type, and Pooley's description recognises this:

*YATTON.-There are few remains of Crosses in Somersetshire that present proportions so grand as these. By the construction, and style of ornamentation, of the socket, its massiveness, and the lofty Calvary of six steps, it may well be supposed that the structure, when entire, was one of no ordinary beauty.*

*In plan it is octagonal. It is erected in the churchyard, opposite the south porch of the church, and covers a large area of ground. The socket is remarkable for the manner in which it is constructed. Its sides are set to correspond with the direction of the church, which is north, east and south-west. In its upper bed it is a true octagon, the alternate sides being worked, by slopes of double curves, into lesser octagons, which die away into square angle shafts by means of small broaches. On the north and west faces are oblong recesses, into which panels were evidently at one time fitted; on the south and east the panels remain in place. They measure 16 in. by 15 in., and are decorated with carved figures of angels robed, holding scrolls crosswise. A broken stump of the shaft is left in the mortise. The plinth, or top step, on which the socket rests, is effectively cut with sharp nosings, that form triangular tables similar to those of the crosses of Wraxall and Dundry. Of the six steps forming the lower stage, the basement only has an overhanging drip, and a convex set-off on the ground-line. It is no less than sixty-eight feet and eight inches in circumference.*

#### Measurements:

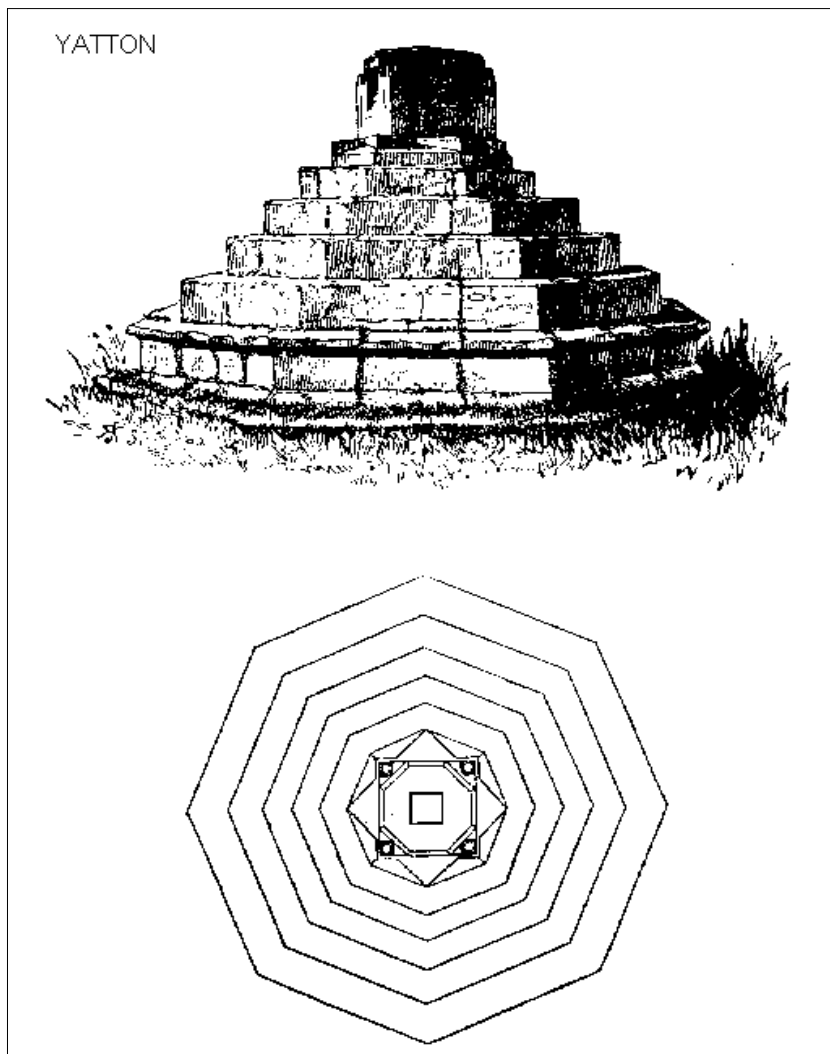
	Steps		Height		Width		Socket			
	Each face		ft.	in.	ft.	in.	Height Square at base			
	ft.	in.					ft.	in.	ft.	in.
Basement	8	7	1	8	1	5	2	9	3	5
2nd step	5	9	1	3	1	1				
3rd step	5	0	1	2½	1	0				
4th step	4	0	1	0	1	1½				
5th step	3	2	1	0	0	10½				
6th step	2	4	1	0						



*Fortunately there has been preserved, in the old records of the church, the following entry, which decides not only the date of the erection of the Cross, but its cost also:-*

*'The New Cross was erected AD 1499, and cost eighteen pounds '-a large sum, equal to about two hundred pounds of our money [or £8800 today]. This date helps us to decide that of other Crosses of similar construction.*

*The elaborately carved south porch of the church was built about 1486, and the Newton Chapel in 1498, (one year before the 'New Cross' was erected), by Isabel de Chedder, wife of Sir John Newton, with a tomb to the memory of Judge Newton. This lady might also have built the Cross, the dates agreeing.*  
(Pooley 1877: 41)



*Fig 3: Depiction of the cross and plan in Pooley 1877*

The cross, which is a Scheduled Monument, was restored and a new shaft and head added, in 1919 (North Somerset HER). This was intended for a war memorial, and is commemorated by a rectangular stone plaque, set into the ground below the cross

on the side facing the church, bearing the incuse inscription: 'THIS CHVRCHYARD CROSS / ERECTED AD 1499 WAS RESTORED / AD 1919 TO THE GLORY OF GOD / AND IN MEMORY OF YATTON MEN / WHO DIED FOR THEIR COVNTRY / IN THE WAR OF 1914 - 1918 / THEIR NAMES ARE ENGRAVED / WITHIN THE CHVRCH'. The missing two plaques in the socket, representing demi-angels holding scrolls, were replaced with new at the same time.

The socket holding the shaft has unusual broaches. They begin as traditional rounded fittings, but each becomes a cylindrical feature at the top, with a recognisable shallow dowel hole in the top face of all four. These may therefore once have held figures. There are no dowels or other metal fittings in the cross. Two stones of the first step on the side closest the church have the scars of former iron cramps, although these have been removed, and their sites backfilled with cement.

### **The photographic survey**

This was carried out in 1994. The cross was recorded using Kodachrome 25 transparency film stock and subsequently scanned to disc at 2400 dpi using Epson Twain 5 and Photoshop 7. The records have been archived with the Russett collection but copies will be deposited in the YCCCART archive.

Broadly speaking, the survey confirmed most of the details of previous describers of the cross, but the 'modern' 1919 features were also recorded. A selection of the photographs are published here.

A photograph showing the cross in relation to the church is on the next page. Details recorded included:



*Fig 4: Inset carvings on W (1919) and S (medieval) sides of socket*

These carvings of demi-angels may well have been painted, and may even have had lettering on the scrolls: similar figures on the broadly contemporary Refectory at Congresbury bear the Latin tag 'LAUS DEO' (Praise God). A further medieval inset and 1919 example survive on the E and N sides of the socket. Demi-angels seem to form a common motif on carved crosses: four feature, for example, on the surviving abacus (collar supporting the carved head) on the market cross at Cheddar.



*Fig 5: Dowelled feature on socket and cramp socket on step*

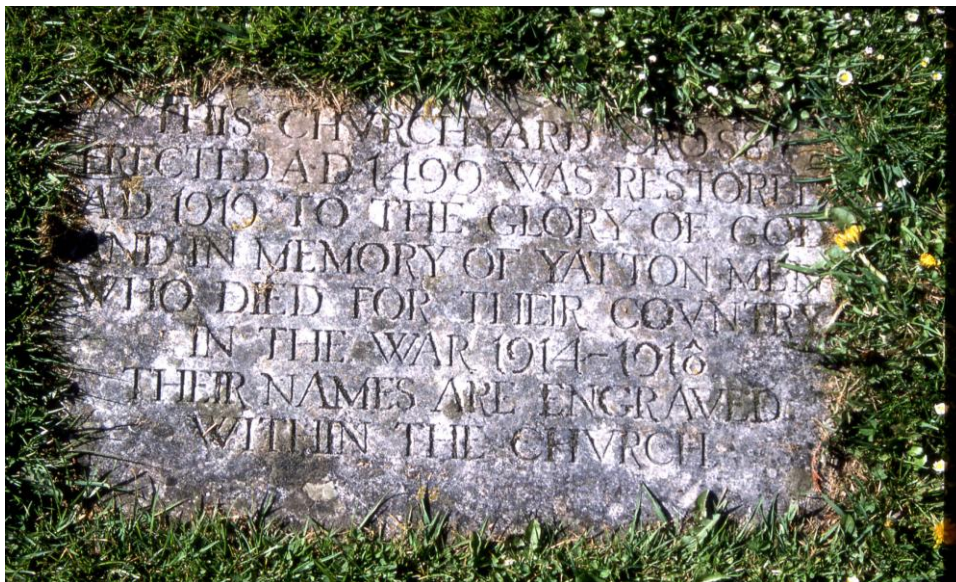


*Fig 6: Churchyard cross and church from south 1994*

Features from 1919 restoration:



*Fig 7: Head of 1919 from below*



*Fig 8: Plaque of 1919, set in the turf to N of the cross*

### **Yatton's other crosses**

There are records of potentially three other crosses in Yatton. Pooley states that one stood in the courtyard at Court de Wyck:

*COURT DE WYCK.* -The remains of the ancient Cross which formerly stood in the courtyard close to the old chapel, now tenanted by cider casks, have entirely disappeared (Pooley 1877: 172)

This cross is not depicted on the Yatton map of c1800 (in private hands, but copied by YCCCART). Pooley's description seems to acknowledge Collinson (1791) ('In this court are the foundations of an old cross'). I made an extensive search of the site in 1991, during an archaeological watching brief, and certainly nothing of a cross survived then.

He added:

*..so also has every vestige of the more noble Cross, called 'Stallings Cross,' which stood a little to the west, [at ST44906615] close by a stream in the high road, where now stands a chapel of the Primitive Methodists. The name has been corrupted to 'Stream's Cross,' by which the site is now generally known. (Pooley 1877: 172)*

Collinson described it as 'westward of [Court de Wyck] stands an old massive cross, called Stalling's cross' (Collinson 1791: 618)

According to a letter of 13 November 1926, in the Somerset County Herald, a Mr B Crossman possessed 'an ancient map of the parish' showing Claverham Cross about opposite the post office, where the stream runs. This is similar to Pooley's location.

The map, which has been recorded by YCCCART, shows a cross-roads named 'Claverham Cross', which is probably the name of the cross-roads itself, and does not indicate the former existence of a cross in itself.



Fig 9: The depiction of Claverham Cross on the 1800 map

A local story had it that stones from this cross had been built into the gable wall of 6-8 High Street at Claverham, but I personally saw this building undergo very extensive rebuilding in 1997, and saw no evidence of such.

Finally, an intriguing note concerning Yatton church and a potential cross-head.

A undated hand-written note in the margin of the SANHS library's copy of Pooley, listing cross finds since his publication, includes the note '*Yatton-St Margaret from a cross head (now in church)*'. It is not known if this item survives, or even if it was correctly identified at the time. If so, it could be part of the missing head of the churchyard cross, but in the absence of better evidence is listed separately here. Is this stone still in the church? Perhaps we could search for it.

## References

Collinson, J. 1791	<i>The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset</i> Collinson, Bath
Pooley, C. 1877	<i>An historical and descriptive account of the Old Stone Crosses of Somerset</i> Longmans, Green and Co, London
Russett, V. in prep	<i>The Old Stone Crosses of Somerset</i> Russett, Weston-super-Mare
Rutter, J. 1822	<i>Delineations of the north-western division of the County of Somerset (etc)</i> Rutter, Shaftesbury
Tozer, M. 1989	<i>Around Nailsea, Long Ashton and Yatton in Old photographs</i> Alan Sutton, Gloucester
Watkins, A. 1930	<i>The ancient stone crosses of Herefordshire</i> Watkins, Hereford

## Author

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