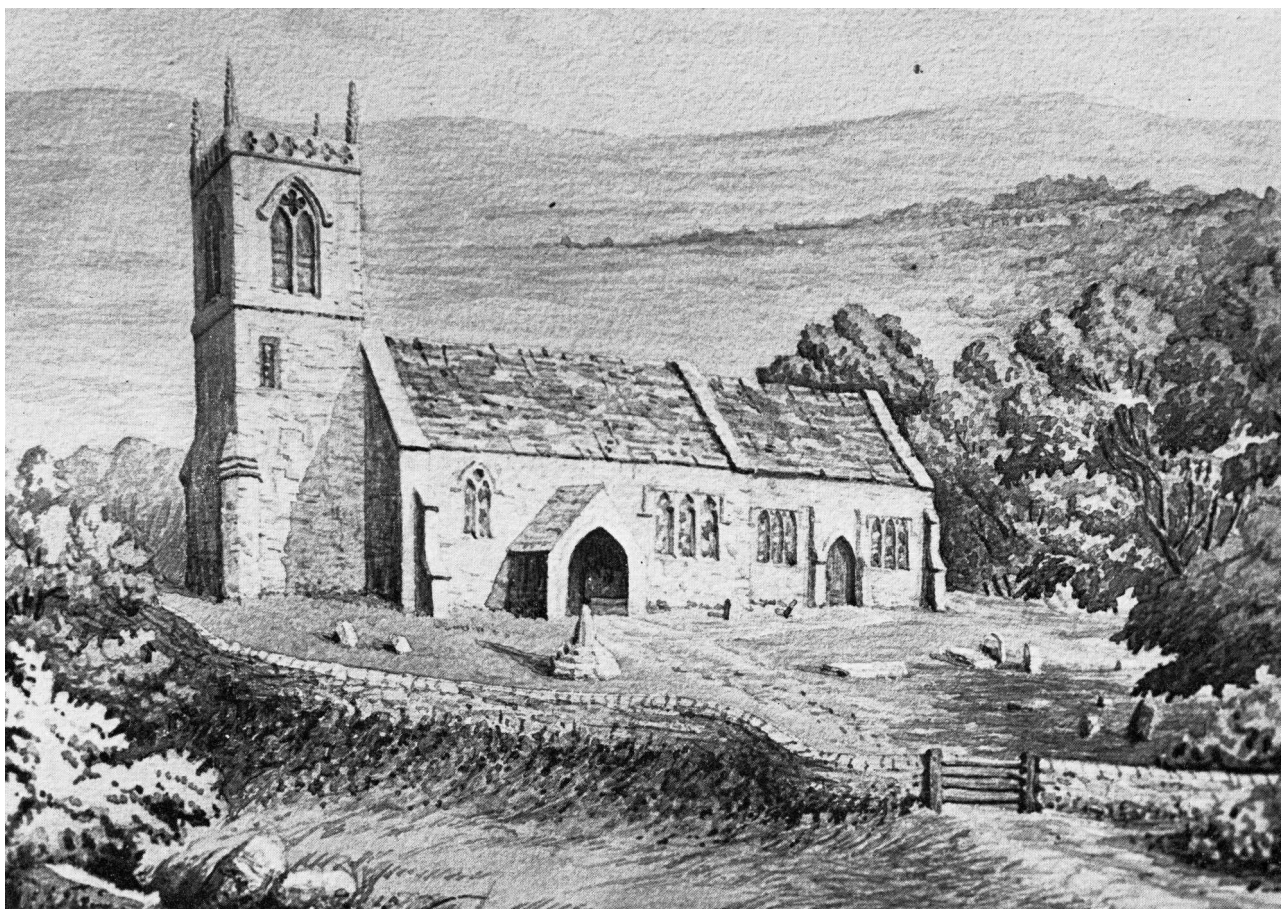


YCCCART 2021/Y3

The Old Stone Crosses of Weston-super-Mare

**YATTON, CONGRESBURY, CLAVERHAM AND CLEEVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL
RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)**

General Editor: Vince Russett



One of the confusing series of drawings showing Weston churchyard cross, from before 1825

An historical comment

'...lying at its feet, is the growing watering-place of Weston-super-Mare. It is a town without a history.' (Knight 1902:43)

'Four Scheduled Monuments, seven conservation areas, hundreds of Listed Buildings, a large Iron age hillfort with massive contemporary field systems, multiple prehistoric burials on the southern flanks of Worlebury, an early medieval ringwork castle, some of the earliest sixteenth century evidence for calamine mining in the country, at least 4km² of waterlogged prehistoric peat deposits, a huge medieval and later fishing presence at Birnbeck, three medieval churches, one Registered and twenty four unregistered Historic Parks and Gardens, two known medieval harbours, hundreds of Defence of Britain historical military sites, at least 40 known Roman sites, at least 50 known prehistoric sites...yes, Weston definitely has no history...' (VR 2021)

Admit it: you smirked when you first read the title of this report. You are not alone.

This strange perception that unlike anywhere else in Britain, Weston-super-Mare is a place with no history, has shaped all histories of Weston to the present day. Even the most recent begins Weston's history in the late 18th century, when even the most cursory glance at the early maps of 1768 (or even the 1838 Tithe Map) shows clear evidence of, for example, the medieval fields of the village.

This perception has also, until comparatively recent times, poisoned efforts to promote conservation and heritage in the town. Many buildings and areas demolished without adequate record (or care) in the post-WW2 era would almost certainly be of sufficient quality to become Listed Buildings had they survived until today.

The scandal of the Carlton Street clearances for redevelopment in the 1950s (although much of it remained as ground-level car park until the 21st century, it has since been redeveloped - as a multi-storey car park) should be a better-known story. It is not alone either.

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Abstract

The existence of at least two old stone crosses in the area of Weston-super-Mare Town is borne out by documentary evidence, although only a fragment of one (in the churchyard) remains. A third object, claimed by Knight to be the head of a cross, and now in Weston parish church, is self-evidently not, and probably represents a porch carving of a type known locally at Bleadon and Axbridge.

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.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCART) 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

Weston-super-Mare 1



Fig 1: Location of Weston-super-Mare 1

The cross stood in the southern half of Weston parish churchyard of St. John (parish church lies at ST31796194, and is accessible from Lower Church Road) although it seems from documentary evidence to have been moved at least twice since c1800 (see fuller discussion below).

Geology and land-use

The churchyard lies on the Carboniferous Limestone, on an outcrop which a few metres south falls away to the blown sands of much of littoral Weston.

It is a (closed) churchyard, and open to the public.

Location

Weston-super-Mare 2



Fig 2: The (original) site of Weston-super-Mare 2

The original site of the White Cross (as it was originally known) seems to have been at the point where the pre-20th century boundaries of Weston-super-Mare and Uphill entered the sand dunes, at around ST31555993, at the NW corner of Royal Sands, in Marine Parade. It's movement is discussed below. There is nothing visible at the site today.

Land use and geology

The original geology of the site was in the blown sand that constitutes most of the Weston littoral. This overlies the alluvial clays and peats of the Northmarsh.

The site has been much engineered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the original site is part of a public highway.

Historical & archaeological context

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 boundary crosses were much rarer.

Weston 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, but has tended to otherwise be a small detail in illustrations of Weston parish church. In nearly 50 years of study and recording of crosses, I have never found any illustration or description of Weston-super-Mare 2.

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, 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 Shepton Mallet).

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 (including allegedly one at Weston, 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 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.

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).

Parish and manorial boundary crosses rarely survive, although they are often mentioned in documents, and locally examples are known at Weston (see below), Cheddar, Wells, Wedmore and a few other places.

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

The idea behind this report was twofold:

1. To gather together all that can be told of the history of these two crosses and further object
2. To remind people that Weston-super-Mare is most emphatically *not* a 'town with no history', but was in medieval times a perfectly normal farming and fishing village, probably about the size of Kingston Seymour today.

Methodology

The gathering of materials relating to the history of medieval stone crosses is fraught with difficulty, as (for example) with few notable exception, they do not appear on Tithe Maps and only occasionally in historic documents. Some (mostly large and fragile remains of market crosses) were drawn before their ultimate demolition, but even some large and important structures (such as the town market cross in Bruton) do not ever appear to have been depicted.

The report was written in Libre Office 5 Writer.

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

Results

Weston-super-Mare 1 (now at ST3179361933)

This cross was in Weston-super-Mare parish churchyard, where a fragment still remains, now moved up against the parish church wall, apparently (according to large scale OS plans) between 1886 and 1903.

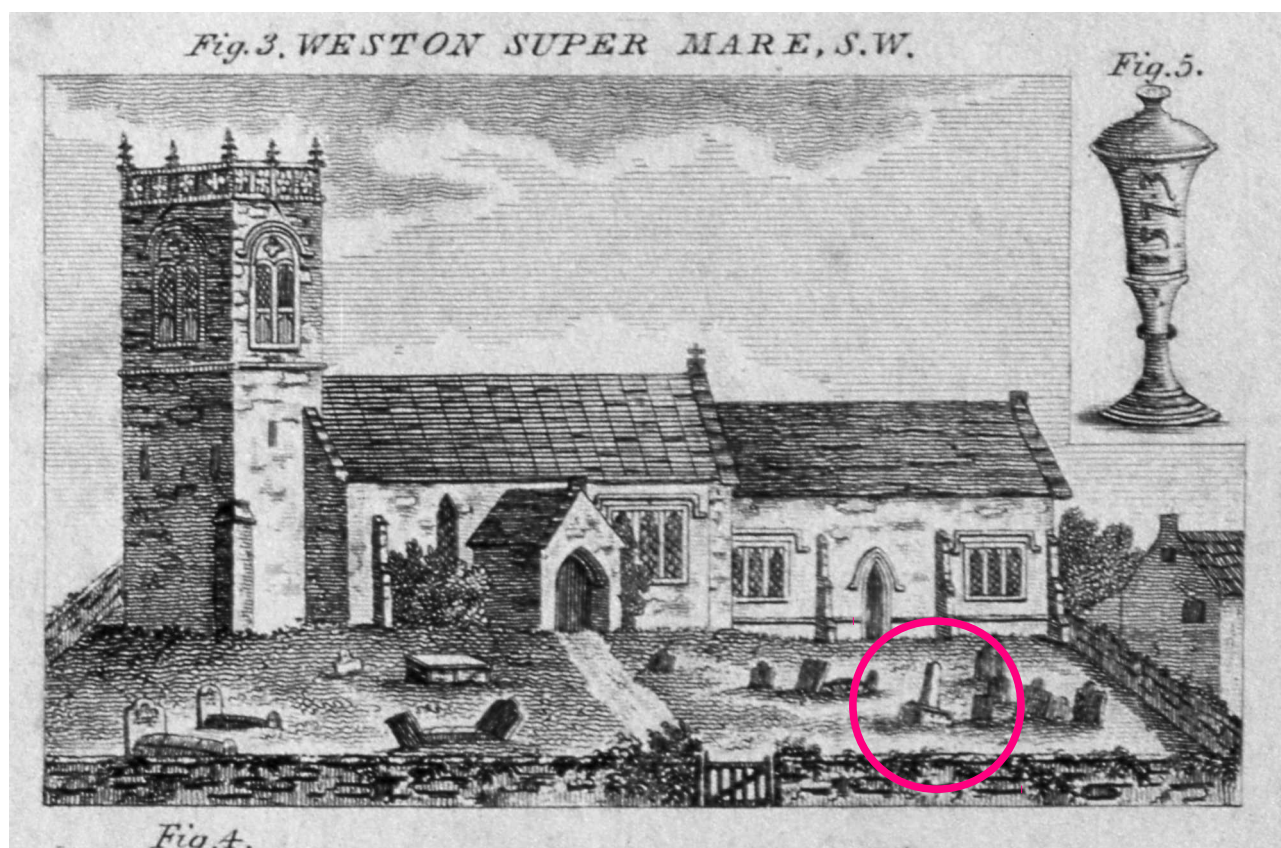


Fig 3: George Bennett's drawing of the churchyard cross (circled), c.1805

George Bennett depicted it at approximately ST3179061923, and where Pooley speculated in 1877 that the steps of a cross may exist.

This drawing in the Tite collection shows the church in 1805 (before any restoration had occurred) and at this date, a socket and shaft, without any steps, was shown clearly far to the east of the site recorded in the current church guide.

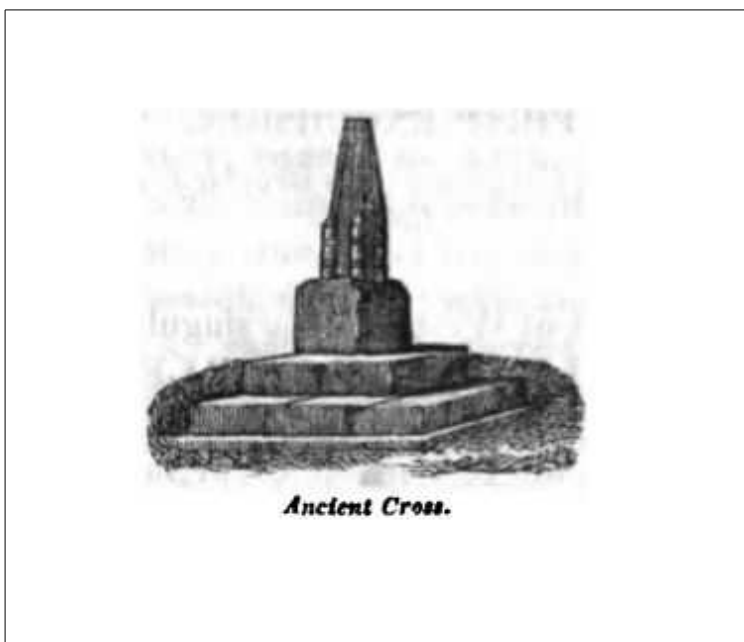
The cross was shown, leaning to the east, on the eastern side of the path running due south from the south porch, which would be in its correct liturgical position to the right of the path leading to the church door. This is repeated in a second drawing, dated 1823, published by Knight, where what is clearly recognisable as the current structure can be seen by the side of the path to the church, its scale given by the depiction next to it of the bent figure of an elderly woman, presumably about 1.7 - 1.8m high (Knight 1902).

Alas for certainty.

A second (pre-1825) drawing of the cross shows it at c ST3178061922, close to, but not on the site of, the modern War Memorial.



Fig 4: The pre-1825 drawing, published without attribution in the church guide



This clearly shows the cross on the other (west / left) side of the path, and unlike the earlier drawing, shows the cross socket on three surviving octagonal steps.

The picture is confused further by John Rutter's lithograph of 1829 (Fig 5), which shows the recognisable currently surviving fragment of cross standing on three square steps.

Fig 5: Rutter's illustration of 1829, in 'The Westonian'

Unfortunately, the next reliable map of Weston-super-Mare (the 1838 Tithe: Fig 6) does not depict the cross.

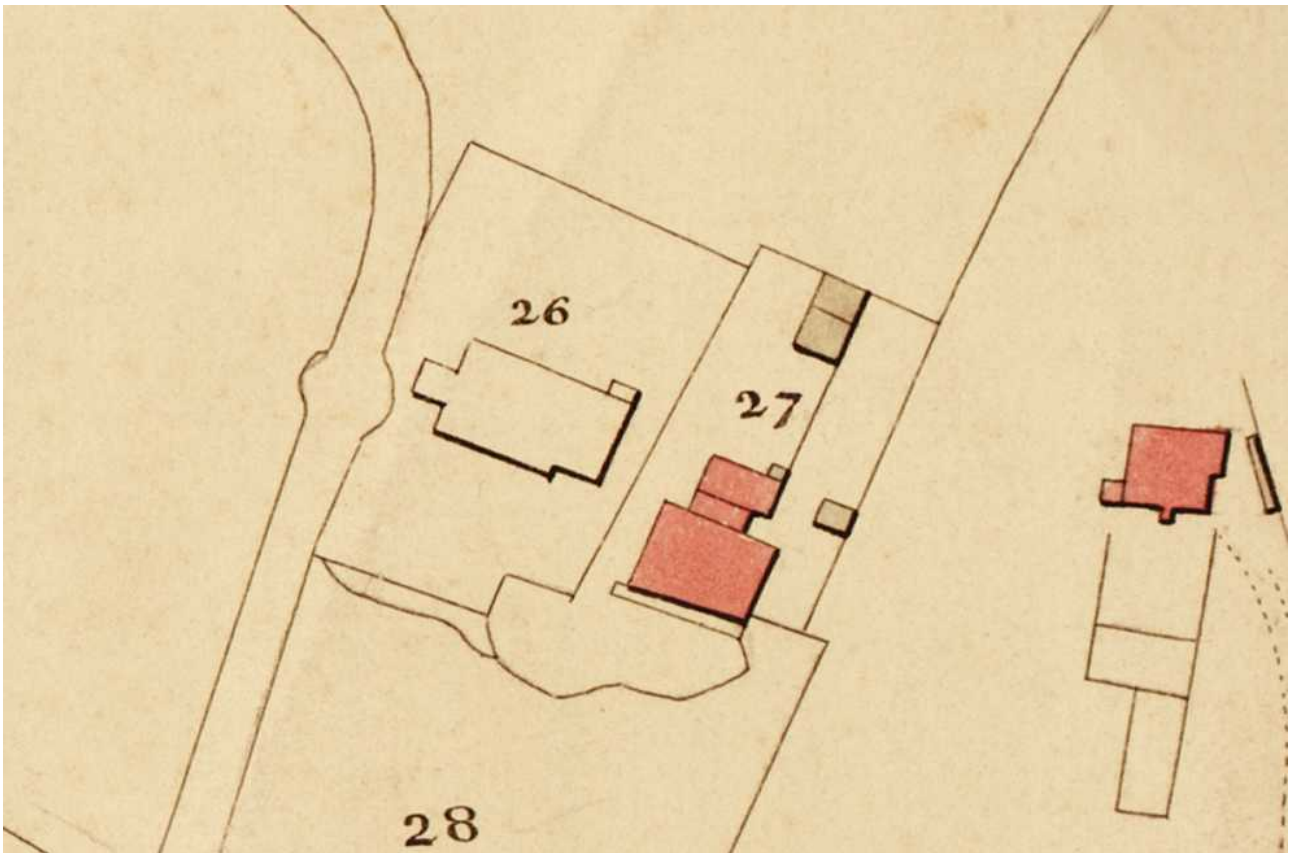


Fig 6: Weston parish church on the Tithe Map of 1838 (labelled '26')

The first really reliable large-scale map of Weston is the 1886 1:500 Town map (Fig 7 below)



Fig 7: The cross from the 1886 OS 1:500 Town Map (circled)

This records the cross in yet a third position, at ST3179161930, across a path from the church wall.

Subsequent OS plans are not large enough scale to judge accurately, but the 2nd edition, from c1903, appears to show the cross in its current position right against the church wall.

The cross is now in the position where I first photographed it in 1974 (Fig 8).



Fig 8: The cross in 1974 (photo by VR)

It has not moved since.

So what are we to make of this positional malarkey? Firstly, it is important to remember that the subject of most of these drawings and maps was the church, with the cross being very much a secondary object of attention.

More puzzling are the appearing / disappearing steps. There can be no doubt about the date of George Bennett's drawing (Fig 3 above). The only suggestion I can make is that the pre-1825 drawing in the church guide may in fact be older still (and that Rutter made

a poor copy of it for his illustration in *The Westonian*). This would give time for the cross steps to be dismantled, and the cross moved to a more convenient position, which seems to have happened at least twice since.

It now has three stone brackets (fragments of old Perpendicular tracery) cemented to the shaft and socket, hideously disfiguring the structure, which is a Scheduled Monument (LEN 1005420). These were in place before 1974, and were probably added to the structure when it was moved. The corner broaches of this socket are extremely deep, and the top is bevelled on all faces. The original site has been suggested to be that of the modern war memorial, although as discussed above, we can see this was not the case.

Rutter did not depict the cross in his woodcut of the old parish church of Weston, although he does mention '*...within it (the churchyard) are the mouldering remains of an ancient cross...*' (Rutter 1829: 47).

The dating of the cross is problematic, other than 'later medieval'. The corner shaftlets on the remaining shaft are unusual for a cross in the north of Somerset: they seem mainly to be a feature of crosses in South Somerset / North Dorset (Marples 1974).

Two faculties exist concerning crosses in Weston-super-Mare churchyard (1922; 1953) but both seem to be concerned with the war memorial.

Although Scheduled, no description is currently available from EH.

Weston-super-Mare 2

If the difficulties surrounding the churchyard cross are significant, they pale compared to that around the White Cross.

A small cross called the White Cross formerly stood '*in a meadow near the site of Ellenborough Crescent*' (Knight 1902). The structure is not depicted on the 1886 OS 1:500 Town Map (or any other map for that matter), so its travels are not solveable with current information.

Ironically, it seems that the initial site of this cross was in the sand dunes on the boundary of Uphill and Weston-super-Mare parishes, where it was depicted on a map of Weston Moor in 1794 (now in the Weston Local Studies Library). The cross thus originally stood within a stones throw of the hospital where Pooley worked!

He records its removal some years previous to 1877 to White Cross House. This house was recorded at ST 32166112 in 1887, and still exists, but there do not appear to be any remains of a cross in the area, as indeed, Pooley had himself recorded. White Cross House (ST32166112) had been newly erected by Mr Richard Parsley in 1829, and the base of Weston super Mare 2 had already been moved to it then (Rutter 1829: 47). The cross in its original position gave rise to the name of the adjacent Whitecross estate, and the subsequent shift of the place name about 1km north was due to the removal of the structure and the naming of Parsley's house.

The third subject

Behind a stained and murky glass front, the tower of Weston church contains the depiction of a crucifixion.



Fig 9: The crucifixion carving formerly in the south porch of the 19th century church

Knight (1905) suggested this was the former head of a cross, but its shape and lack of wear show this structure was almost certainly a porch carving, as can also be seen locally at Bleadon, Axbridge and elsewhere.

Recommendations for further work

Weston-super-Mare 1 could use some attention (especially Historic England acquiring a site description in the on-line List).

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Date

2021-06-15