

YCCCART 2018/Y5

The Old Stone Crosses of Wick St Lawrence

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RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)**

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Wick village green with it's impractical village cross

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Abstract

Wick St Lawrence is one of those rare villages that possessed (and still does possess) both a village and a churchyard cross. Whether these villages are simply accidents of survival (and many villages once possessed both), or were marked out in some way in the medieval period, cannot at present be known.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, my thanks go to Linda Jenkins, who's pamphlet on the subject in 1991 should be far better known.

Thanks to the people of Wick St Lawrence for their care of their two crosses: the village cross deserves to be better known.

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



Fig 1: Location - the red arrows indicate the position of the two crosses

Wick St Lawrence is a tiny village 2.7km NE of Worle village centre and 20km west of Bristol, reached by a drive of some 3.6km from the A370 at Hewish. The churchyard and village crosses are respectively at ST3664265435 and ST3660465387.

Land use and geology

Both are in public open space under grass. The village cross is in an open space in the centre of the village, the other in the churchyard close to the south porch.

Both crosses, along with the church and a couple of houses, are on an isolated 'island' of Blue Lias in the middle of the alluvial clays of the Northmarsh.

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 crosses were much rarer.

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, 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 (old) 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.

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).

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*).

Wick St Lawrence was a chapelry of Congresbury, always associated with it in documentation.

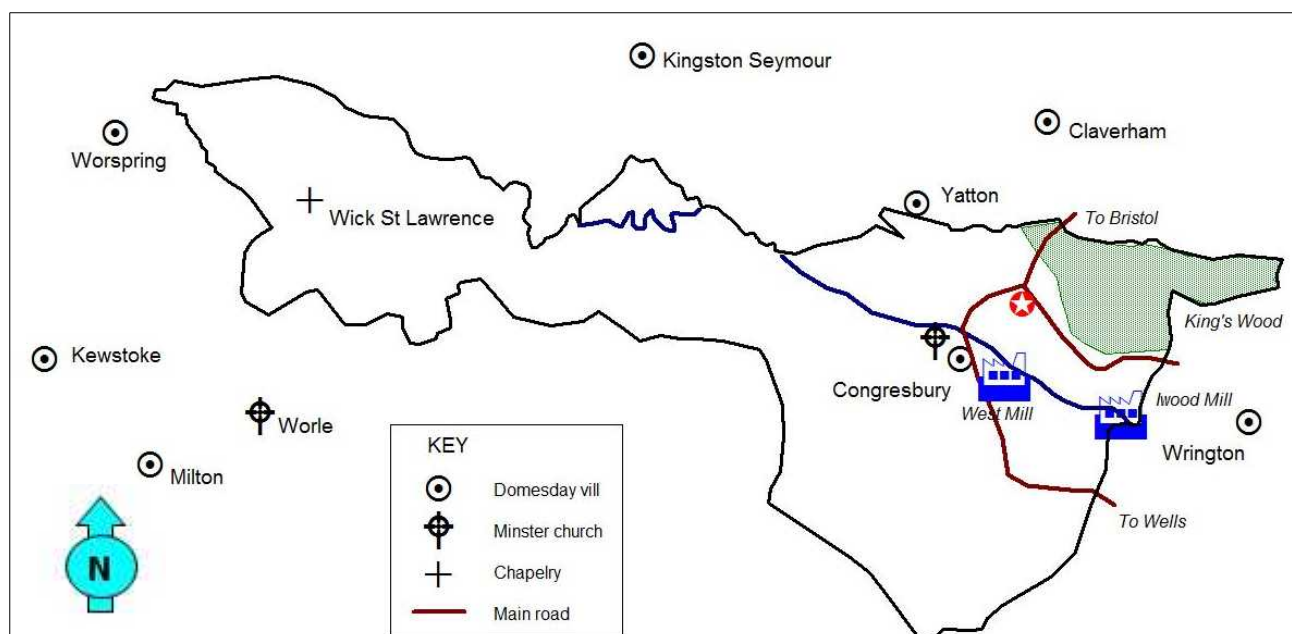


Fig 2: Congresbury Hundred: local features

One clear fact we know about the area of northern Somerset is that a Hundred of Congresbury was in existence by the time of the Geld Inquest in 1084 (Roffe 2000). The Congresbury Hundred seems to have consisted of the manors of Congresbury, Wick St Lawrence, Iwood, and perhaps more surprisingly, part of Badgworth and East Cranmore, near Shepton Mallet. Thorn (2010) puts forward a convincing argument that this strange chimaeric hundred was the work of Harold Godwinson (later King Harold II), who seized Congresbury in c1060 from the bishop of Wells. This may perhaps account for the otherwise inexplicable dedication of Badgworth parish church to St Congar, who's main cult centre was at Congresbury (Oates and Costen 2003). Once Congresbury had been

returned to the bishop by King John (Cran 1983: 29), there was no need for a separate Hundred of Congresbury, and like Cheddar, it was absorbed into the vast Hundred of Winterstoke, to the south.

The Congresbury Hundred (Fig 2) lay on two main routes between Bristol, Wells and Wrington. In addition, its south-east boundary with the present parish of Churchill is almost certainly a Roman Road (Gardner, K. pers comm). The Congresbury Yeo (blue line in figure) was navigable in the medieval and later periods as far as the weir at West Mill, although this would have been present in 1060.

Most of the land to the west of Congresbury village is below 8.0m AOD, except for the rise of about 1m at Wick St Lawrence church.

Wick itself is not named in Domesday Book, where it was probably counted as part of Congresbury, and is first definitely named in 1225, according to Ekwall (1960: 516), although his references seem garbled.

As is usually the case with stone crosses, there are no medieval references to Wick's crosses at all, and they can only be dated roughly by comparison with others.

Village cross



Fig 3: Village cross, 2016

Wick St Lawrence, Old stone crosses, Documentary and photographic, 2018, Y5, v1

The village cross at Wick is very tall, largely due to the basement below the first step, which means that the cross is not accessible without a ladder or removable steps (Fig 3). The basement is also mortared, and in a local roughly coursed and squared Carboniferous limestone, whereas the rest of the cross is in an Oolitic freestone.

The origin of this basement is, to say the least, a mystery. The Buckler drawing of 1827 (see below) appears not to show this base, with the grass growing up to the bottom of the first step proper: similarly, Pooley's drawing of c1870 does not show it either, although the drawing in Pooley may be a simplified copy of Buckler's plan, and so may not be independent evidence. He does show an apparent loose scatter of stones to one side of the cross, however, which Buckler does not. The earliest photographs, however, of around 1900, do show the basement clearly. If Pooley's drawing is a copy of Buckler's (and Pooley admits some of his other illustrations are), then the restoration of 1865 (see below) may be a key: at this date, perhaps the soil around a previously covered basement was dug away, or (perhaps less likely) the cross was re-erected on a new basement. Either way, the intention may have been to dissuade children from gathering on the cross, a constant fret by Victorian churchmen.

Either way, this cross is probably late medieval. Its socket is very similar to the two identical ones at Dundry and Burrington, with the exception that Wick's cross has blank trefoil-headed panels, whereas the other two feature a small shield in each. All three are of Douling stone (even Dundry) and have probably been ordered from a central masons yard, probably at Wells.



Fig 4: Socket of village cross 1st January 1974

The cross is occasionally mentioned in village records, having been 'repaired' in 1721,

1833 and 1865 (Jenkins 1991). The first repair could have concerned the churchyard cross, but this seems unlikely.

The earliest known illustration is by Buckler, in 1827.



Fig 5: Buckler's drawing of Wick village cross in 1827 (SANHS collections)

This shows the cross (Fig 5) in more or less its present condition (with the exception of the basement - see above). In particular, the head of the cross is missing. The top of the shaft was not squared off, as today.

Charles Pooley visited at some time in the 1870s (Pooley 1877). His comment was:

WICK S. LAURENCE.- This conspicuous and handsome Cross stands in an open space in the village at the back of some poor cottages and nearly opposite the church; it is an excellent example of the group of Crosses belonging to late Fifteenth century. Its ample Calvary of five octagonal steps, massive square socket with buttressed angles, horizontal mouldings and panelled sides, relieved by pairs of trefoil-headed flat arches, divided by a mullion, as in Dundry Cross, and the delicately fluted tapering octagonal shaft, all point to the Perpendicular period as that of its erection. The basement is well splayed and recessed, the slabs forming the bench making a deep weather-drip. Walling has been necessary to level the work. The shaft is fixed with lead into the mortise. It has been repaired at the sole cost of the Rev. Aubrey Townshend.

Measurements:

	Steps		Socket						Shaft			
	Each face		Height		Height		Square at base		Height		Square at base	
	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.	ft.	in.
Basement	5	10	2	0	3	1	2	4	6	8	1	2
2nd step	5	0	1	1								
3rd step	4	2	1	1								
4th step	3	1	1	0								
5th step	2	1	1	0								



Fig 6: Pooley's drawing of Wick village cross, 1877

His comment that 'walling has been necessary to level the work' presumably applies to the basement, but really takes us no further.

Jenkins mentions

'.. accorded to handed-down memory (Wilfred Ballam through his mothers family), the cross was once topped with a ball..but it was knocked off by local youths in the last [19th] century. The ball was probably added during the 1865 repairs, but soon succumbed to the attentions of 19th century vandals, as no top is mentioned in Charles Pooley's 1877 description of the cross in his book..'

An early photograph (unfortunately not accurately dated) shows there was indeed a finial to the cross at one point (SHC A CFH 4/2 and 4/3). The scrapbooks in question were

dated 1915, but often incorporate earlier, unreferenced, material.

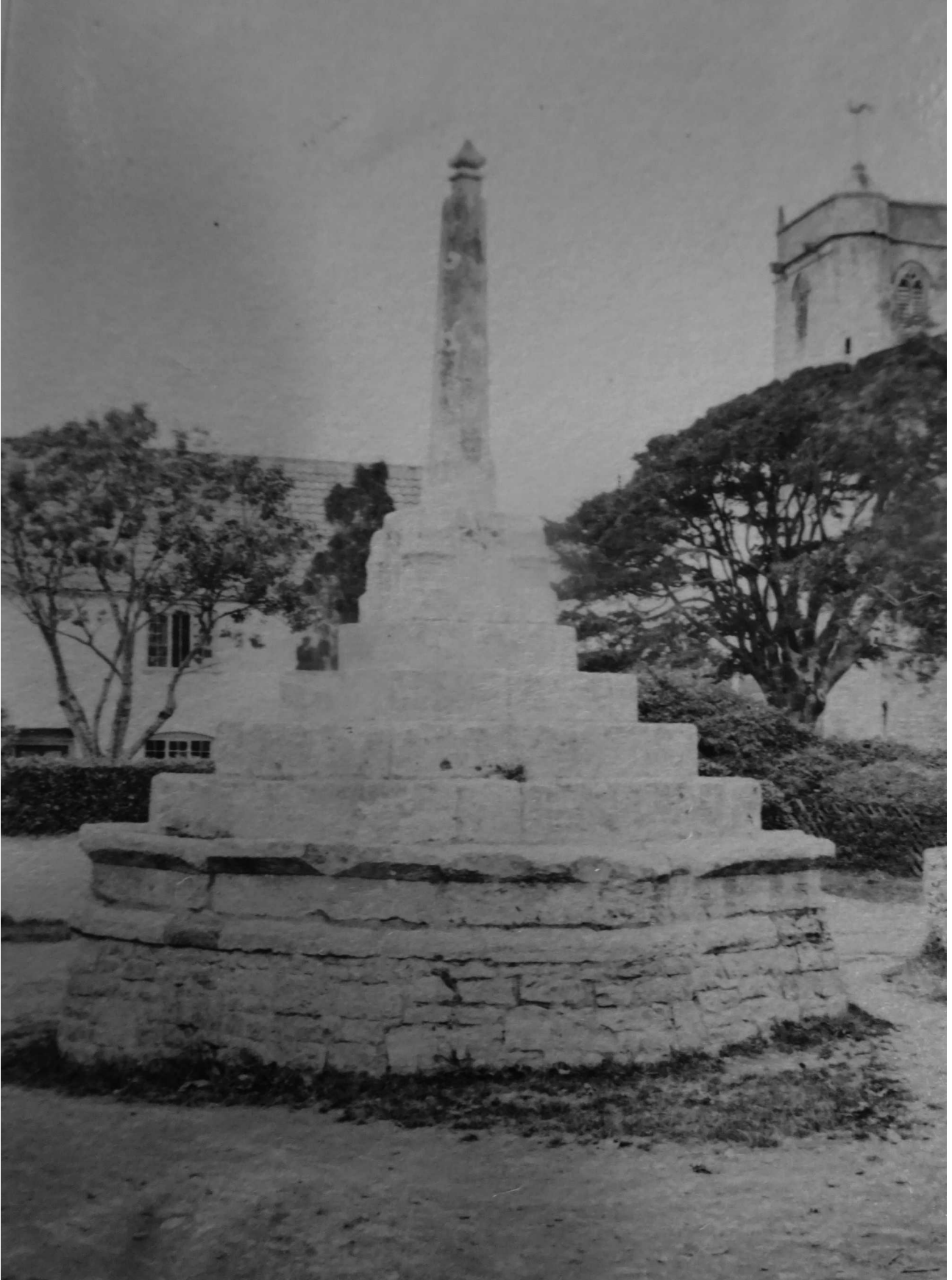


Fig 7: Undated (but probably pre-1900) photograph of Wick village cross

Wick St Lawrence, Old stone crosses, Documentary and photographic, 2018, Y5, v1

The finial is a small square shaftlet with bead, topped with a stone bulb. This presumably originated at the 1865 restoration. The existence of this finial, topping a square-off shaft in a late 19th century photograph is perhaps further indication that Pooley's drawing is a copy of Bucklers.

A photograph of a similar date from the SANHS Tite collection shows the finial now missing.

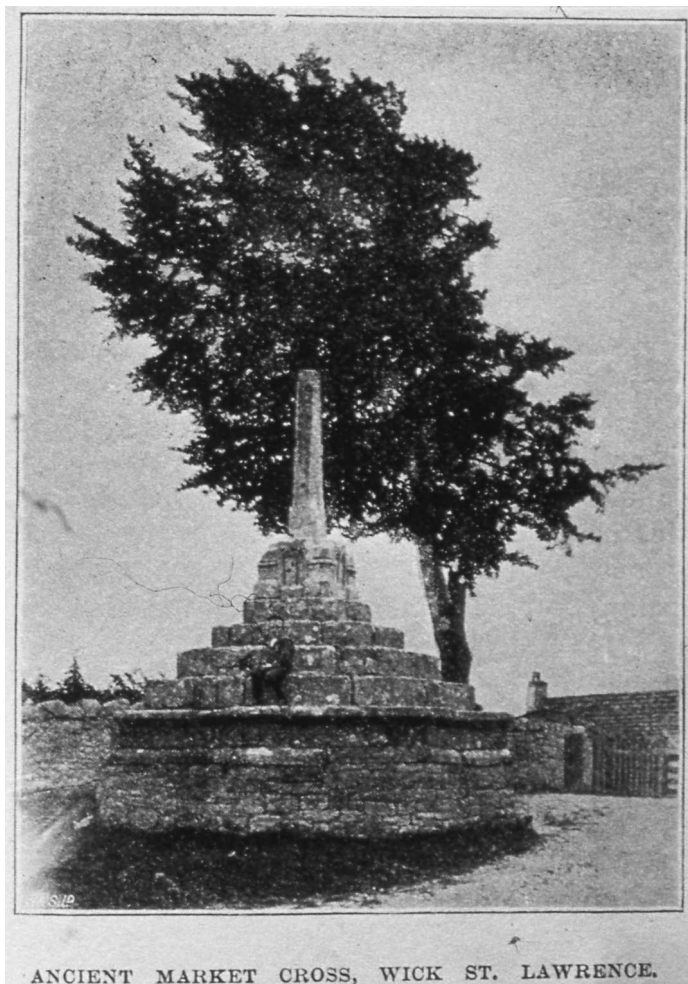


Fig 8: Photograph of Wick village cross from Tite Collection (SANHS)

The finial cannot have lasted much more than 30 years at most, so perhaps Jenkins' informants were correct.

Certainly the time the first postcards arrive around 1905, there is no finial on the cross.

According to Jenkins

'..in Wick during the Great War children from the school just down the lane marched to the cross and gathered around it to sing patriotic songs..'

The cross was then again repaired in 1947 by the village, but an unsuitable mortar / concrete mix was used, and the cross began to require more repairs by the 1970s.

Warwick Rodwell wrote to Woodspring DC in 1977, regarding the poor state of the monument.

Further confusion ensued when the ownership of the cross became an issue for funding works. Eventually, the cross was returned to the parish council by Bristol Municipal Charities (who held it as they had Congresbury village cross) in 1997.

The shaft has a little graffiti on its north face, but otherwise, the monument is in good condition.

The churchyard cross

This has suffered grievously over the last 200 years.



Fig 9: Wick churchyard cross, 1827

Buckler's (admittedly, unspectacular) drawing of the churchyard cross in 1827 (Fig 9 above) shows three steps of the cross surviving, and possibly not even on its current site (it seems to be further from the church porch than today).

Pooley sniffily dismissed it with '*..In the churchyard are the ruins of the octagonal base of another ancient Cross..*'

Jenkins makes the suggestion:

Soon after this date, in 1836, Henry Sheppard of Wick was allowed by the Churchwardens to have the stones lying in the churchyard for his trouble making the returns to the Court of Sewers. Stones had probably been 'lying about' since lightning badly damaged the church in 1791, leaving a terrible mess until the mid 19th century renovations. Perhaps the remains of the cross were considered to be 'lying about', and were carted off too.

The current remains of the cross are very close to the church porch, and may lie on a slight mound, but this is emphasised by the deeply cut path from the gate to the porch door, and may not be archaeologically significant.

The cross is an octagon of worked stones forming an octagonal flower bed today (Fig 10).



Fig 10: Wick churchyard cross, 2016

The stones seem very large for such an apparently small cross, and have benching on them. The possibility must be entertained that this is simply a flowerbed made up with worked stones, potentially from the churchyard cross, although the apparent mound they stand on adds some credence to this being the site of the cross.

The Historic England Scheduling document refers to 'Probing around the base of the calvary suggests there is stone c 0.1m beneath the surface to a width of 0.5m from the base of the calvary indicating the presence of another calvary step or substructure below ground' (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1016198>), which is also encouraging and tending to view this as the original site.

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