

YCCCART 2021/Y4

The Old Stone Crosses of Wraxall and Failand

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RESEARCH TEAM (YCCCART)**

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Wraxall 'Cross Tree' under reconstruction in 2007

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Abstract

There are reputed to have been at least three stone crosses in Wraxall and Failand, while a fourth object has been suggested (but subsequently proved not to be a cross). Unfortunately, that status of one has been compromised by a watching brief in 2007, while the exact site of a second has not been possible to establish as yet.

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

Wraxall and Failand 1 and 2



Fig 1: Location of Wraxall and Failand 1 and 2

Wraxall and Failand 1 is situated at ST4902271948, next to the junction of three paths, in the churchyard of All Saints parish church, Wraxall, in North Somerset.

Wraxall and Failand 2 lies at ST4909871897, on a former traffic island at the junction of the B3130, and Wraxall Hill in Wraxall, North Somerset.

Land use and geology

Both lie on an inlier of the Dolomitic Conglomerate. Wraxall and Failand 1 is available to the public in the churchyard: Wraxall and Failand 2 can be reached from the adjacent west pavement, as traffic is now confined to the road to the east of the cross.

Location

Wraxall and Failand 3 and 4

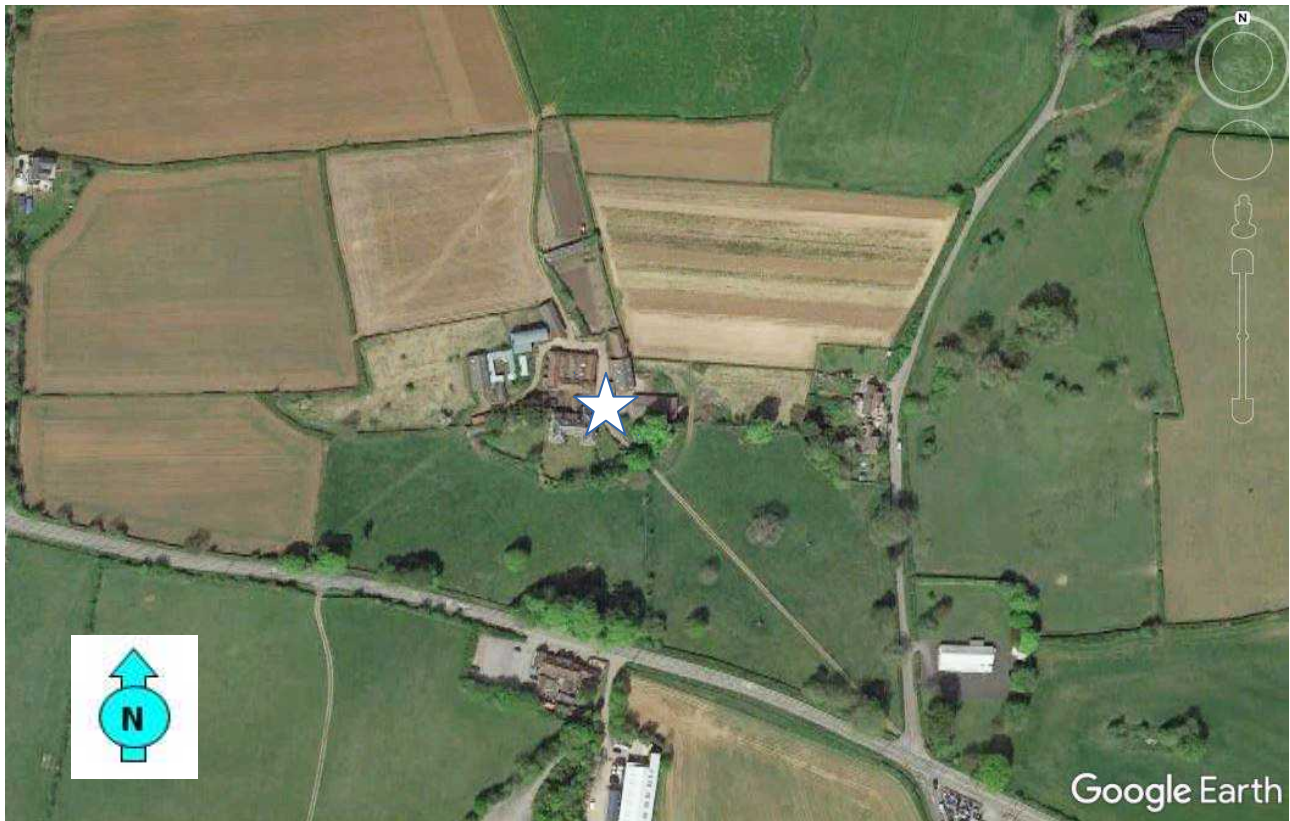


Fig 2: Site of the old Failand Inn, Wraxall and Failand

Wraxall and Failand 3 stood in close proximity to the old Failand Inn, which stood at ST51437207, some 130m north of it's current site beside Clevedon Road.

Land use and geology

The site of Wraxall and Failand 4, and presumably the site of Wraxall and Failand 3, lie on the complex geologies of the Carboniferous Limestones of Failand Ridge.

The site of Wraxall and Failand 4 is in a private farmyard: a public footpath passes close to it. The exact site of Wraxall and Failand 3 is unknown.

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 other crosses were much rarer.

Fortunately, the nearness of Wraxall to Bristol means that some of the structures were recorded, especially by S H Grimm at the end of the 18th century, much of whose work can be seen on the British Library web site.

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).

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 object of this report was to put together what is known of the crosses of Wraxall and Failand, along with some early illustrations that have become publicly available in recent years.

Methodology

The fieldwork for this report was undertaken over many years since 1974, with repeated visits to the known crosses, and the witnessing of a watching brief on rebuilding of Wraxall and Failand 2 in 2007, by Dick Broomhead.

The report was written in Libre Office 5 Writer.

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

Results

Wraxall and Failand 1: Churchyard Cross

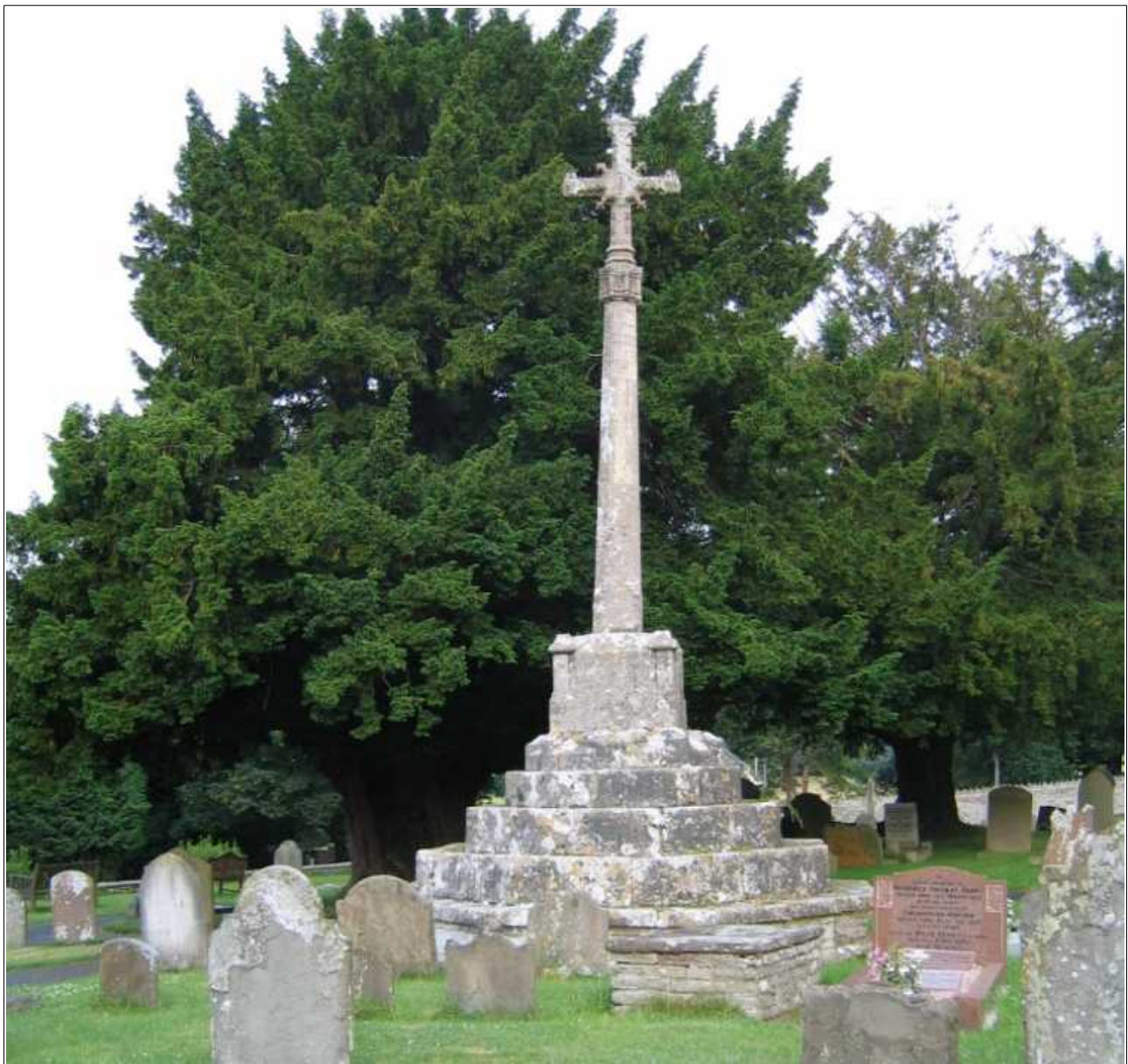


Fig 3: Wraxall churchyard cross (2003)

This cross is a Grade II* Listed Building, whose List description runs:

Churchyard Cross, in the Churchyard and to the south of G.V. All Saint's Church

*II**

Churchyard cross. C15, restored 1893, probably by Sir Arthur Blomfield. Ashlar octagonal base of 4 steps. The shaft has a square base set on an octagon; bases of pinnacles set on the corners. Tapering octagonal shaft with a restored head.

Historic Englands very short description ignores some notable features of this tall cross (see below).

The first illustrations of Wraxall and Failand 1 were made by S H Grimm at the very end of the 18th century.

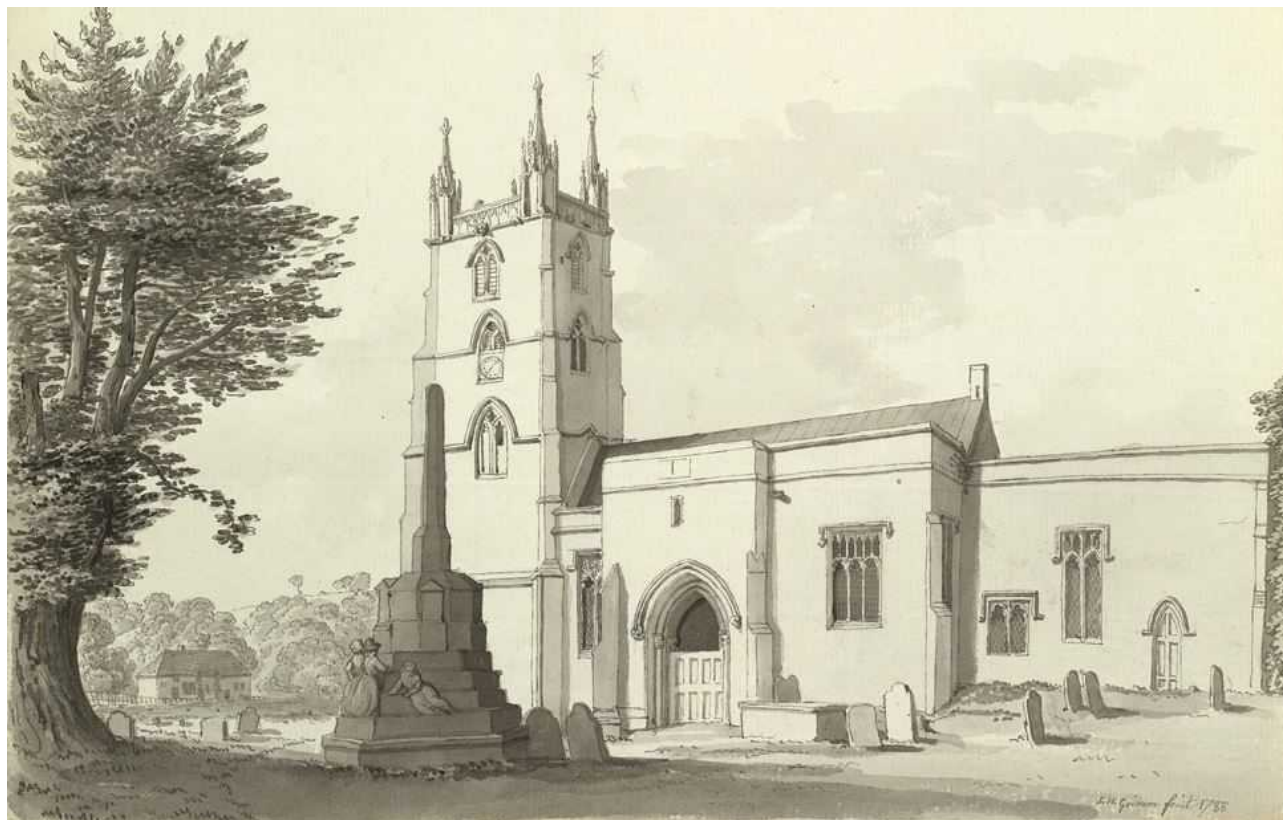


Fig 4: Wraxall churchyard cross by S H Grimm (1788)

This earliest known illustration (above) shows good technical knowledge of the structure of the cross, which clearly stood at the same site as today. There is no head to the cross.

Grimm shows three children playing on the cross, a feature which in some areas was enough for the cross to be demolished to prevent this (at Nunney, near Frome, for example).

He returned ten years later to draw the cross in more detail (Fig 5 below).

Curiously, this new drawing is much less accurate than the first, not showing some features (such as the stone ledging on the lowest step) which are both in his earlier drawing, and visible today.

Conceivably, this new drawing may have been a copy of his own drawing of 10 years before: most of his topographical drawings are tolerably correct (although with the recognisable 18th century tendency to exaggeration, leading in this area to the drawing of mountains behind Clevedon!)

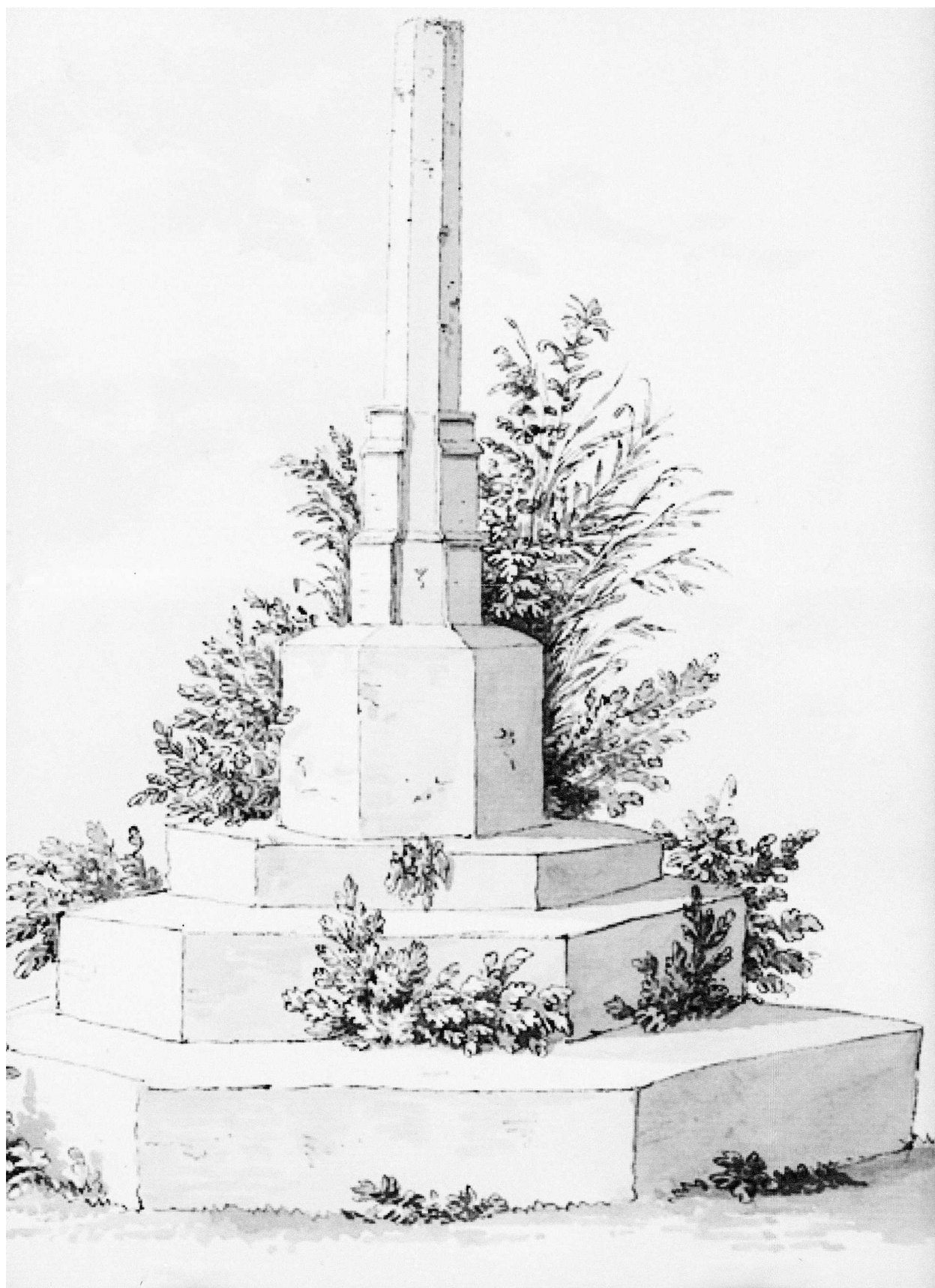


Fig 5: (Allegedly) Wraxall and Failand 1 by S H Grimm (1798)

If this is Wraxall and Failand 1, details of steps, socket and shaft are all inaccurate: indeed the curious structures at the base of the shaft are so odd that I almost wonder if this picture is not of Wraxall at all, but along the route has been confused with somewhere else. It far more closely resembles the cross standing in the (then) abandoned churchyard at Walton St Mary (now part of Clevedon), and this is probably a mis-attribution somewhere.

Buckler produced an image (1827: Fig 6 below) which is the first to make a stab at depicting the 'star-plinth' under the socket (discussed below).



Fig 6: Enlargement of portion of J C Buckler's 1827 image

He also (more-or-less) depicts the socket with its corner shaftlets.

Fortunately, Buckler also drew a much more detailed depiction of the cross in the same year (Fig 7 below).

While the depiction of the star-plinth is uncertain, this is not uncommon at this date, and it was not really until Pooley's 'Old Stone Crosses' in 1877 that the star-plinth was defined and carefully depicted.

Otherwise, Buckler's depiction is clear and accurate, especially in the matter of the square socket with corner shaftlets, an uncommon form in northern Somerset (Marples 1975).

Some other (rather less accurate) depictions followed, before Charles Pooley's definitive record in 1877 (Pooley 1877: 82) (Fig 8).



Fig 7: Wraxall and Failand 1 by Buckler (1827)

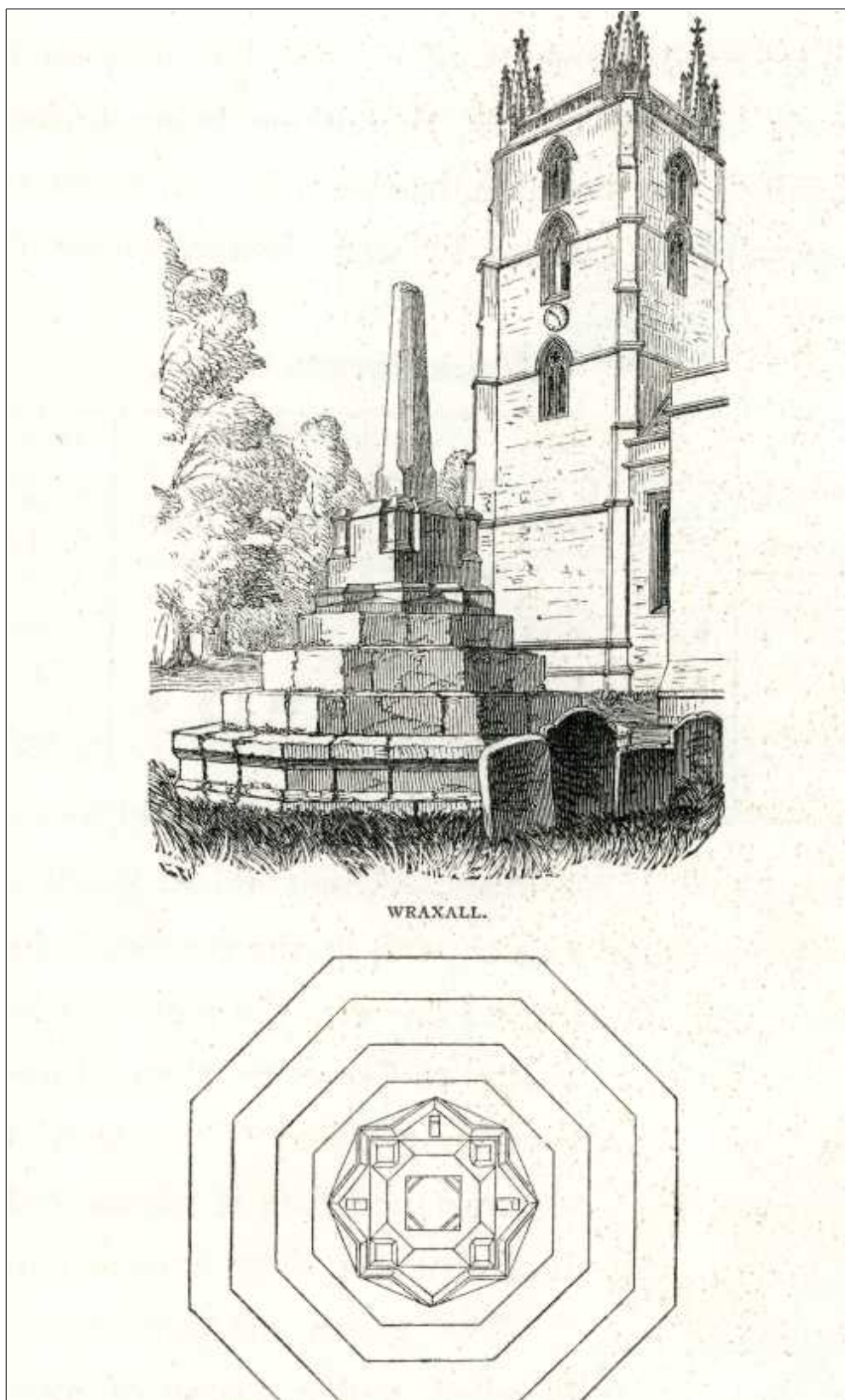


Fig 8: Wraxall and Failand 1 by Pooley (1877)

As the plan view in Fig 8 shows, Pooley grasped the concept of the star-plinth and depicted it correctly for the first time.

He also noticed that the points of the plinth had once hosted affixes, which had damaged the plinth when removed (see below).

No affixes of this kind survive anywhere in the West Country, although new ones have been attached to the churchyard cross at Charlton Mackrell: it has to be said that to modern eyes they look a bit silly, and terribly vulnerable.

There are several 'fours' in biblical and related texts.

The most obvious subjects for affixes of this kind are the four evangelists, but others (such as the Doctors of the church) are equally plausible.

Only a couple of photographs survive from before the cross was 'restored'.



Fig 9: Wraxall and Failand 1 from Wood Collection (c1890)

While this photograph does suffer a little from some of the problems of early architectural photography (lack of contrast, poor choice of background) which cannot be entirely corrected with Photoshop, it is a useful image.

A new floriated cross head was added to the top of this cross, about 80cm wide. The shaft was cut off square at a height of c 1.5m, a second fragment of old shaft added, and then new shaft and the head. The total height of the cross is now c4.77m.

The new head was said to have been "*...made up of old pieces...*", and was 'restored' in 1893 (Master 1900). The pieces, if they really were old, may have been a gable cross or such like from the church.

Details from modern photographic recording help to flesh out the picture of the cross.



Fig 10: The star plinth of Wraxall and Failand 1

The star plinth, with its complex bead-edged moulding, seems to be a late medieval feature: the one at Dundry shares this feature (along with gaps where affixes have been removed), but the one at Congresbury seems not to.

A second modern photograph shows signs of violent removal of affixes.



Fig 11: Socket in star plinth for affixes

It has to be said that the steps of the churchyard cross at Wraxall seem to be remarkably crisp in details, and it has to be wondered whether some unrecorded 'restoration' has taken place at some date.

Wraxall and Failand 2: The Cross Tree

This structure at the junction of the B3130 and Wraxall Hill has naturally caught attention due to the large elm tree that formerly grew in it (alas, lost in the Elm Disease of the 1970s).



Fig 12: Wraxall Cross Tree (post card of 1904)

The accepted story of this cross is that it constituted a 'market cross' from the time when 'Wraxall had a market and was a town' (Pooley 1877: 85). I am not aware of any historic documents that show this: Wraxall, like many villages, had a market, but there is no indication in either historic documentation or landscape that Wraxall ever had any pretensions to urban status.

Pooley's 'ancient elm' survived long enough for me to photograph it in 1974 (below).

However, over the years, the stones of the steps had become loose and far from level, and in 2007, the Parish Council commissioned a rebuilding / resetting exercise, along with a required watching brief, carried out by Dick Broomhead.

From Broomhead 2007:

Archaeological observations were made during the dismantling and re-erection of the structure known as Wraxall Village Cross located at the junction of Wraxall Hill with the B3130 in the parish of Wraxall and Failand. Despite minimal stratigraphy, secure archaeological evidence was located indicating that the structure as it currently exists

probably dates from the early 18th century and can be no earlier than 1699. Additional documentary evidence, mortar samples and a recovered coin show that much of the structure was rebuilt in the early 20th century. Although the capping stones are well weathered and themselves may be derived from an earlier structure, no evidence of such a structure could be determined.



Fig 13: Wraxall Cross Tree (1974)

A farthing of 1698-9 was sealed under the structure of the Cross Tree, which means that either the structure did not originate until after 1700, or that very large scale 'restoration'

was carried out at some subsequent date. Much local anecdote claiming otherwise, is just that- anecdote. Broomhead (as he states) was unable to find any convincing evidence of an earlier structure at the site.

This not to say adamantly that there was not (proving a negative is difficult), but that there is little or no basis for claims of the structure to be a medieval market cross.

This structure is a Grade II Listed Building, whose List description reads:

Remains of Village Cross at NGR ST 4910 7190 at Junction with Clevedon Road

II

Remains of village cross. C15. Ashlar. Octagonal base survives, from approximately one to two feet high

Wraxall and Failand 3



Fig 14: Wraxall and Failand 3

S H Grimm drew this cross in 1788. The background of the picture is not sufficiently accurate to work out the location of this structure, but from the topography, the best that

can be said is 'on the north-facing slopes of the Down, somewhere north of the Old Failand Inn'.

It certainly no longer exists, and was presumably removed at the inclosure of the Down, c1800.

Archer (1987) describes the cross as *'hardly a cross at all...standing in a waste of fields'*.

Wraxall and Failand 4

An illustration by S H Grimm of the yard of the Old Failand Inn shows what appears to be the remains of a cross.



Fig 15: 'Wraxall and Failand 4' by S H Grimm (1788)

However, Keith Gardner had a better quality copy of the drawing, and could show that the item (on the far right of Fig 15) was actually a seat made around the remains of a tree (something fairly ironic considering the interpretation of Wraxall and Failand 2).

Recommendations for further work

It would be useful if Historic England could revise their Listing details for Wraxall and Failand 2, as the memory of Broomhead's work in 2007 has faded locally.

References

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Authors

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Date

2021-06-28