YCCCART 2023/Y8

The Old Stone Crosses of Wrington

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Broad Street, Wrington 18th century scene, with village cross central (after Neale 1969)

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Abstract

The village of Wrington was in post-medieval times an exceptionally important market, being highlighted on county maps of the time. Little remains to be seen of the market paraphernalia, of which the village cross was one element, and which itself may have predated the importance of the postmedieval market. A wealthy manor in monastic ownership might well expect to possess many crosses, especially on the boundaries of the parish, but documentary evidence of such has not been forthcoming.

Acknowledgements

A very early Bristol University Extra-mural course at Wrington in 1964-5, involved fieldwork arranged and managed by Frances Neale, who has never received sufficient recognition for this innovation. This work included the copying of the watercolour that preserved the appearance of the village cross.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCCART) is a Community Archaeology team working across northern Somerset.

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 locations

Fig 1: Wrington and the three crosses

Wrington is today a medium sized village at ST46946283 (market place). It lies close to the southern edge of Broadfield Down: the Congresbury Yeo runs south of the village.

Fig 2: Sites in Wrington village

It is 14km SW of the centre of Bristol, and is in the unitary authority of North Somerset. Lye Cross was at ST4899762308, at the junction of Lye Cross Lane and the A38, and gave its name to the adjacent Lye Cross Farm.

Land use and geology

All three sites lie on the Mercia Mudstones, at the southern facing foot of Broadfield Down.

Sites Wrington 1 and 2 in the village are in the village market place (Broad Street) and the churchyard, respectively. Both are in the public domain, but there is nothing visible at either site. Silver Street Bridge is in a public highway, as is the site of Lye Cross 2km to the east.

Historical & archaeological context

Wrington parish today is only a fragment of that outlined by the 904 Saxon charter (Neale 1969: 87-108), which included the current parish of Burrington. It thus included high open grazing land on both Broadfield Down and Mendip, as well as a swathe of the Congresbury Yeo valley, with the Yeo and its four medieval mills.

While a favoured country residence of the Abbot of Glastonbury during its ownership (late 10th century-1534), Wrington was not an important medieval market town like (say) Taunton, Bath or Wells.

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.

Wrington's crosses have been surprisingly ignored in most general histories. Pooley (1877) provided a few paragraphs of text: Neale (1969) published a line drawing featuring Wrington village cross, copied from a water colour then (1965) in the village, but whose whereabouts are not currently known.

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 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*).

Unlike many of the market towns and villages in Somerset, Wrington village cross was never a large collonaded structure, such as can be seen at Cheddar, Shepton Mallet or Somerton today, or in recorded sources at Taunton, Axbridge or Nether Stowey.

This may be because, unlike the above, Wrington's market did not really rise to prominence until after the late medieval period and the immediate post-medieval period up until the Second Civil War, during which some new crosses (such as Somerton) were built. It stood at one end of Broad Street, away from the market houses and other features which stood further west towards the centre of the street, and this may well reflect its role in an earlier, smaller rural market.

Methodology

The report was written in Libre Office 5 Writer.

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

Results

Wrington 1: the Village Cross in Broad Street ST4696762797

Judging by the drawing (report cover), the village / market cross at Wrington had hexagonal steps, a similar hexagonal socket with a chamfered top, and a tall shaft with (apparently) a tall head with ball top, probably of post-medieval date. Judging by the figures around it, the whole cross was about 6m high.

The 1738 map of Wrington shows a circle at the supposed site at the east end of Broad Street: Fig 3 (below).

Fig 3: Site of the village/market cross in 1738

Many market crosses were removed in the 18th century, as they were apparently seen as becoming blockages in the traffic growth of the time.

Local legend in Wrington holds it that the coachman of the Lord of the Manor, frequently the worse for wear, hit the cross enough times to want it removed.

The earlier, more prosaic explanation is more likely, though.

Charles Pooley (1877) gives a different reason:

'One [cross] *stood at the junction of the three roads near the 'Golden Lion Inn'. Several old people remember having sat on its steps. About fifty years ago* [1827] *it was pulled down, and the stones used in building a bridge in the neighbourhood. The reason assigned for its demolition was that it became a meeting-place for idle boys, who played on the steps'.*

Pooley's reason is another given in many parishes for removal of crosses: Victorian (especially) clergymen seem to have had little time for anyone actually using the crosses for the purpose for which they were built, in a word, sociability.

Confirming both is a note in Somerset Proceedings for 1887: it was said that the stones from the cross were used as the 'battlements' of a local bridge, and added that

'*...the cross was removed almost during living memory..in the time of the Rev W Leeves incumbency..the cause of its removal is said to have been that on a dark night a coachman, not very steady on his box, ran his masters carriage against it, and it was thought wiser to remove this ancient land-mark rather than dismiss the careless driver...*' (Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society 33, p10, 1887)

The bridge in question seems to have been Silver Street bridge (Fig 4) at ST 47146265.

Fig 4: Silver Street bridge (1994), reputed to have been built with the stones of the village cross

It is just possible that elements of Wrington village cross survive under the tarmac: this should be borne in mind when any road repairs are proposed in the area.

Wrington 2: Wrington churchyard cross

Pooley describes a second cross, this time in the churchyard:

'A second [cross] w*as placed in the churchyard, near the chancel on the north side. The steps were in existence sixty years ago* [i.e. 1817], *but have gradually disappeared; no vestige of them is left'.*

It was described as having stood near to the northern gate to the churchyard, and north of the chancel, by Rev Scarth (Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society 33, p12, 1887).

Although the churchyard has been extended (between 1885 and 1903: OS plans). the area between the 'north of the chancel' and the 'north entrance of the churchyard' (from The Triangle) is small: if the cross had a solid stone basement, as did Congresbury village cross, for example, (YCCCART 2016), this could perhaps be found by geophysical survey.

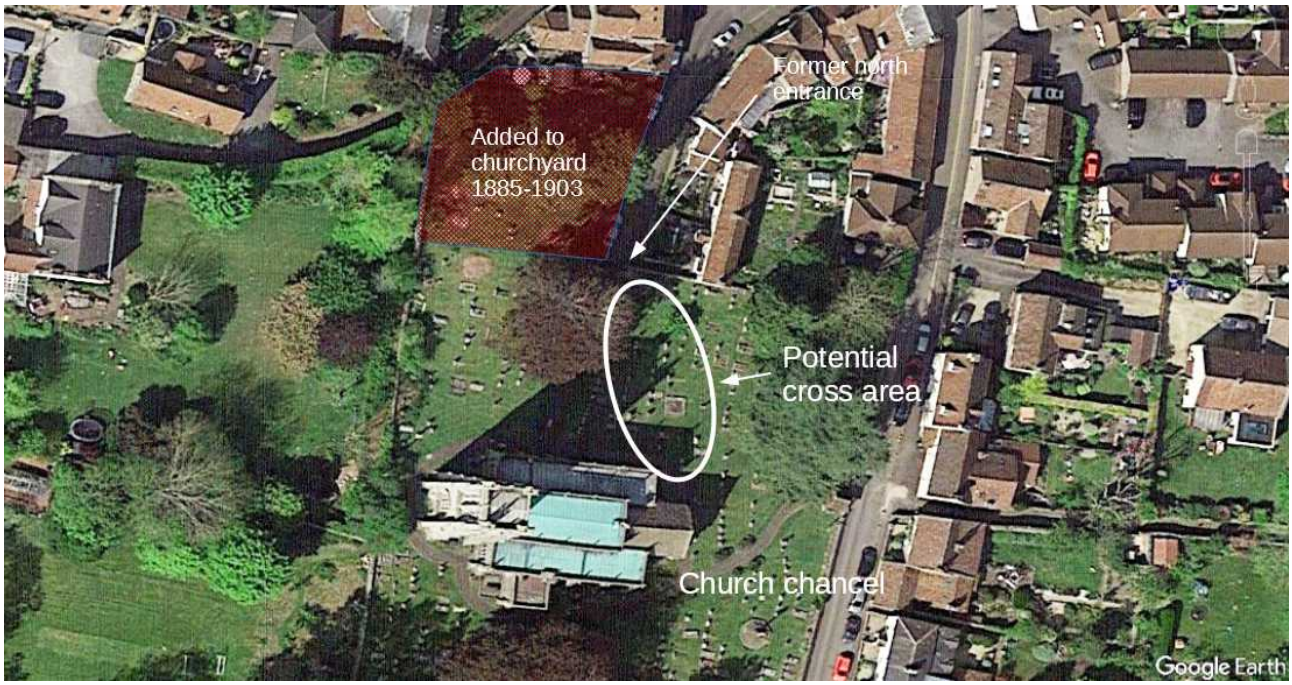

Fig 5: Potential site of churchyard cross, Wrington

In any event, there are several graves with dates varying from 1770 to 1810, which narrows down the space where the cross could possibly have stood. Unfortunately, the crop marks which might have betrayed the position of the cross, which were beginning to develop, have now been obliterated by rain which followed a hot and dry June (2023).

Wrington 3: Lye cross, Redhill

Some 2km east of Wrington village is the site of Lye Cross, a monument which has given its name to the adjacent Lye Cross Farm, as well as the road junction itself.

An illustration (unfortunately unprovenanced) of a 'Lye Cross' is in the library of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

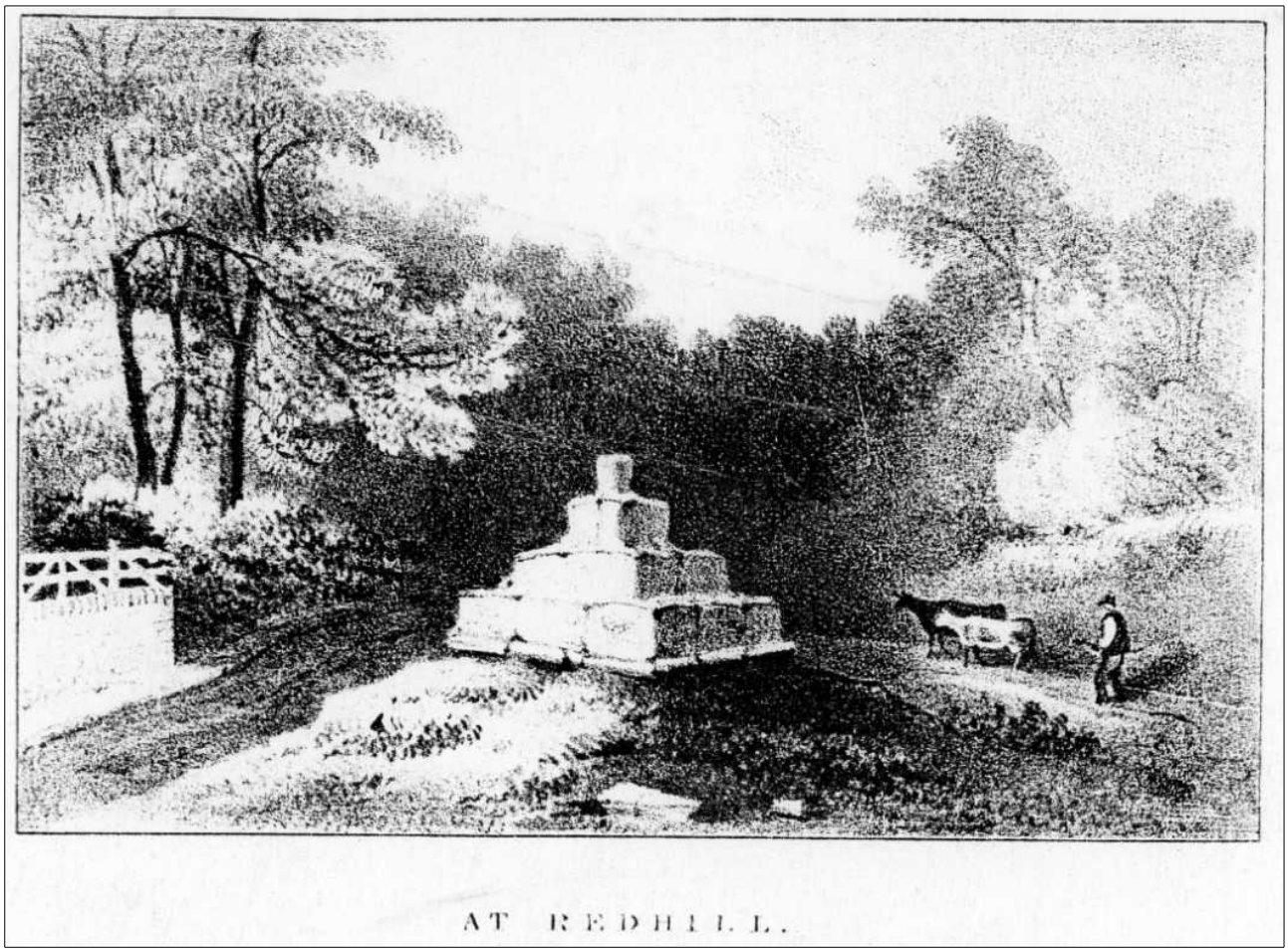

Fig 6: Illustration of 'Lye Cross at Redhill'

This illustration shows a cross on a mound, with two square steps, a square socket and the remains of a shaft. The cross is clearly at a road junction, but there is no background topography to be sure of its position.

The only other reference to this cross is, unusually, on the Wrington Tithe Map. Tithe maps do not often feature crosses (Dundry churchyard is one of the few other exceptions in North Somerset), but the Wrington map (1840) features (alongside anachronistically long 's' text) the structure seen in Fig 7.

It clearly lies in the centre of the road junction, agreeing with the image in Figure 6.

Fig 7: Lye Cross beside the A38 at Redhill

While the 1st edition OS map retains the junction name, it does not show any structure at the site, nor is anything visible at the site today.

Elements of the structure may survive under the tarmac: this should be borne in mind when any road works are proposed in the area.

With Wrington belonging to THE monastic landowner (Glastonbury Abbey), it would be very unusual for at least the boundary of the manor not to be marked by crosses (as for example, the manor of Charterhouse (of Witham Priory), or another Glastonbury manor, Baltonsborough, definitely were) but so far, no documentary evidence to that effect has emerged.

Other 'cross' place names, such as Branches Cross on the Wrington-Redhill road on the outskirts of the village, are probably simple cross-roads names.

Recommendations for further work

Further documentary work on rural documentary evidence, with names of road junctions and / or boundaries could identify other potential sites.

References

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Authors

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Date

2023-07-06