

WICK VILLAGE CROSS Laurie Clifton-Crick

The oldest parts of Wick Church are attributed to the Norman period, and it is from those times onwards that simple, usually undecorated crosses began to appear in towns and villages. There may once have been 5,000 or more such crosses in England, and although over the centuries many were lost to time, or demolished by the Puritans, even today a large number of these, or sometimes just their bases, are still common features in or near our old churchyards.

The earliest medieval examples were preaching crosses set up for the use of travelling missionary speakers, or sometimes where a church building was developing. Such a cross could also be a memorial cross erected at a particular tomb, or otherwise just a symbol of the faith.

In the case of Wick village cross, there is now no way of understanding its origin, or the exact reasons for its erection. Whereas the lower base and the shaft are certainly ancient, to describe it as a preaching cross is probably inaccurate unless it is older than the 12th. century foundation of Wick church itself. Nevertheless, the County Archaeological Officer some years ago described it as being of "considerable importance", and English Heritage had earlier scheduled it as a Grade 2 listed structure.

There is a local belief that the cross was transported to its present site in recent times, but it appears quite clearly in its present position on a map of 1849, and there is in fact no reason to suppose it has ever been moved. Bearing in mind that there was not even any consecrated or fenced churchyard at Wick until a piece of land was bought for the purpose in 1877 from Charles Smith Hudson (following the formation in 1874 of the Pershore Burial Board which the inhabitants of Wick did not wish to join), it is perfectly reasonable to assume that the cross stands on what for centuries had been the village green of the Manor of Wick Warwyn, by the old main street and between the church and the ancient manor house.

By the end of the 1800s the shifting of the line of the road and the formal enclosure of the new burial ground had left the cross marooned in a sheep field where it fell into further disrepair. Indeed at around that time the Journal reported that "the old village cross had lain in ruins for a great number of years". In the early years of the last century the Rev. Charles Henry Bickerton Hudson, who resided opposite at Upper Wick House (today known as Wick Manor), resolved to remedy this. Accordingly he instructed G.F.Bodley (a prominent church architect of that time who had also been responsible for the erection of the lychgate in 1899) to undertake its restoration. A second architect, C.G.Hare, was also involved, but this is most likely because Bodley had died in 1907 some four years before the actual restoration work could be completed.

The principal additions during restoration were the inscription cut round the four sides of the base, and a heavy new head with ornate canopied niches and figures (again attributed by some authorities to G.F.Bodley). Until this addition was made, the cross is described variously as "a tapering octagonal shaft with shaped base on three steps", and "a slender shaft" - there is no reference to any actual cross or upper decoration.

The work was eventually carried out in the summer of 1911 by R.Bridgeman & Sons of Lichfield, and while it was in progress their workmen lodged nearby with Mrs. Emily Arnold who had just opened the "new" Village Stores a hundred yards along the road (in what is now Orchard Cottage). It is not generally known that before the re-erection was completed the workmen placed coins and other objects of 1911 beneath the base of the cross, in what we would now call a "time capsule"

The meaning of the inscription has no doubt been impenetrable to most visitors over the last 100 years, with the exception of those few used to reading archaic lettering, and also familiar with abbreviated Latin. Happily for us lesser scholars, my friend Mr. Robin Whittaker, until his retirement the Archives Manager (i.e. Chief Archivist) at Worcester, has carefully examined the text, and has provided me with the following translation:

(This) was renovated on the feast day of Saint Alban the Martyr in the year and on the day of the coronation of and in the second year of the reign of, George V by CHBH in witness of the monks of the Virgins the Blessed Mary and Saint Eadburgh of Pershore, give thanks for their spirits. "I shall sing the mercies of the Lord for eternity"

The inscription is dated 22 June 1911. CHBH is Rev. C.H.B.Hudson. The quotation is from Psalm 89 verse 1.

The finished cross was blessed at a special service on 27 September 1911 at which Rev. Canon Knox-Little of Worcester was visiting preacher. Hymns were sung in procession to the cross, and the Vicar of Wick, Rev. John Jervis M.A. said special prayers in the open air at the site whilst a large congregation stood in Church Meadow.

This would have concluded the story had it not been that some 70 years later, during a period of gales early in 1984, a particularly high gust of wind caused the heavy top to fall, snapping the upper part of the old and somewhat frail shaft as it did so. Circulars were delivered to every house seeking villagers' opinions as to what should be done, and much discussion ensued. Although a minority thought that the cross with its ornate head should be reinstated just as it been for many years before the gale, the eventual and doubtless most sensible majority decision was that the head should be carefully preserved and displayed inside the church, where it remains today, and the broken shaft given a simple stone cap, so that it looked as it apparently had done for centuries beforehand. Much more recently, the badly-needed restoration of the surrounding area with its corner posts and chains has left the whole structure in a better state than for very many years past.

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