

ANCIENT STONE CROSSES,

WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO THOSE IN THE
COUNTY OF BUCKINGHAM.

(Read at the Annual Meeting at Doddershall, in the parish of Quainton,
by the Rev. W. HASTINGS KELKE.)

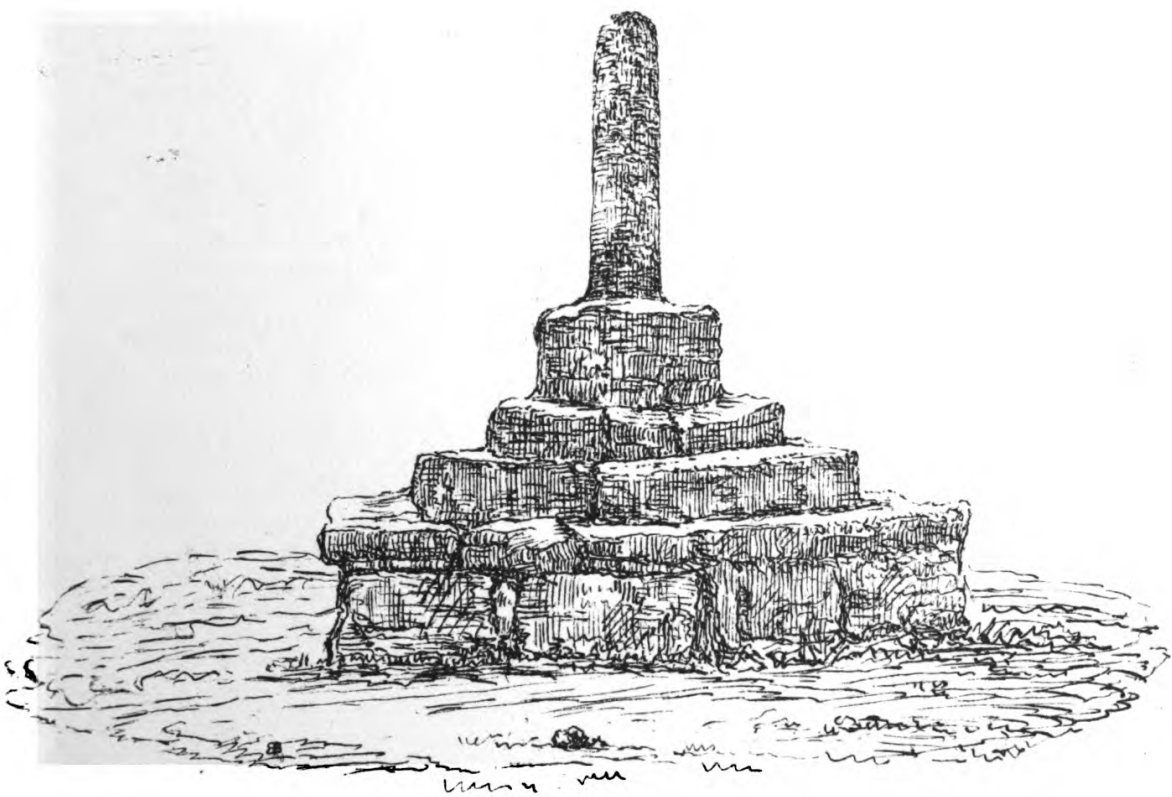
Entering Quainton at the lower end of the square or market-place, a stranger can hardly fail to be struck with the primitive appearance of the place, and with that striking, but, in these days, uncommon object, its venerable stone cross. And every native of the village who, in his childhood, has perhaps gambolled on its steps, and to whom through life it has continued an object of interest, may have often desired to know something of its origin, and for what purpose it was placed there.

Although I have but little to say particularly respecting the Quainton cross, I have drawn up the following brief historical sketch in the hope of throwing some light upon this ancient relic, and others of a similar description in the county.

The general subject of stone crosses is so interesting and comprehensive, that to treat it fully would fill a volume. Within the compass, therefore, of this short paper I must necessarily deal with the subject in a very cursory and superficial manner.

Stone pillars, bearing the figure of the cross, appear to have been occasionally in use among unconverted Romans; but in such cases it is generally apparent from the devices on them, or from other indications, that they were of Pagan execution. My remarks will be strictly confined to such crosses as were evidently designed to symbolize the Christian faith, by reminding the beholder of the crucified Redeemer; and these may be conveniently noticed under the respective heads of Churchyard Crosses, Wayside Crosses, and Market Crosses.

Churchyard Crosses were probably the earliest stationary crosses used in Britain, for the first Christian missionaries usually erected a cross to mark and consecrate



Market Cross at Quainton, Bucks.

the places where they assembled their flocks for prayer and instruction. These places were commonly surrounded by a bank and ditch, or other fence, and thus they became open-air sanctuaries, many of which probably remained in the same state till the Norman conquest, or to a later period. Churches, however, were often built within these enclosures, which thus became churchyards, and the cross became what we call a churchyard cross, though both existed before the church. As the old crosses decayed, many being of wood, others were erected, for churchyards still continued to be held sacred, and whenever new churches were built, their yards or surrounding enclosures were consecrated and stone crosses erected in them. These crosses usually consisted of a stone pillar, surmounted by a cross, and fixed in a basement of three or more steps. In size and elaboration they varied considerably. Some were not more than three feet high, others towered far above the church; some were quite plain, others were richly ornamented, the shaft being covered with interlaced work, and the head formed of an ornamental cross, or of niches containing images, and projecting so as to have the appearance of a cross. But churchyard crosses, I believe, were never built, like many others, large enough to contain rooms. The object of these crosses was to inspire reverence for the churchyard, as consecrated to God and appropriated to the sepulture of departed Christians. They were also designed to excite a devout and reverential spirit in persons about to enter the church, so that it became the practice with many to kneel before the cross, and offer there a short prayer, preparatory to joining in the service of the sanctuary. It is also stated, that occasionally the priest, standing on the step of the cross, thence addressed his parishioners on the shortness and uncertainty of human life, pointing to the graves before him to make his exhortation the more impressive. Sometimes two or more crosses are found in the same churchyard, the additional ones being either to provide more kneeling room, or being special memorials to eminent persons, or perhaps dedicated to particular saints.

Buckinghamshire still possesses the remains of crosses in the churchyards of Hillesden, Wing, Boarstall, Lins-

lade, Stone, Bledlow, Mursley, and Dinton.* That of Hillesden is in the best state of preservation, and appears to have been a handsome structure. It consists of a shaft, on a graduated basement of three heights. The lowest is one foot four inches high; the second, only ten inches, probably meant for a kneeling step; and the third, which is one foot nine inches high, is splayed and ornamented. The shaft, which is octagon, and seven feet seven inches high, has been surmounted by an ornamented head, now much mutilated. This cross derives additional interest from standing near the large grave or pit in which the Royalists were buried, who fell at the siege of Hillesden House, on the 3rd of March, 1643.†

At Boarstall the steps alone of the cross remain; but Delafield says, that in his remembrance the cross was almost entire, so that its present deplorable condition is not owing to the Iconoclasts of the Reformation or the civil wars. Dinton, Stone, and Mursley have, I believe, only the steps remaining.

Wayside Crosses, which were among the earliest stone crosses erected in England, were in use as early as, if not earlier than, the Roman period. Cornwall, where it is well known Christianity flourished at an early date, abounds in wayside crosses, some of which evidently belong to the Roman period. Two examples may be specified: one a small massive cross, with the image of the Saviour rudely sculptured on it—this stands in the parish of St. Buryan, near the Land's End; the other, which has been used as a gate-post, stands in the parish of St. Clement's, near Truro. These are assigned by Mr. Haslam to the fourth or fifth century. At the beginning of the Saxon period, as we learn from Bede, it was customary to erect a cross wherever it was intended

* The circumstances under which this paper was prepared precluded the possibility of obtaining anything like a correct list of the crosses yet remaining in Buckinghamshire. It was the intention of the writer, had his life been spared, to have obtained fuller information on this head.

† The cross in Wing churchyard, of which Mr. Ouvry, the vicar, has kindly presented a photograph, appears to be a very ancient and interesting one. The shaft, which stands upon a stone slab, is square, but with the corners chamfered, and four feet nine inches in height. A portion of it has been cut off, and a sun-dial now occupies the top. It is evidently deserving of more attentive examination.

to build a church or a monastery; and that wayside crosses were in frequent use during the Saxon times cannot be doubted, from the number of examples still existing, especially in Cornwall and the northern counties. And many more would have still been in existence had they not been lately broken up by notable housewives and used as sand-stone for their cottage-floors and entrance steps to houses. They are generally much ornamented with interlaced cord or knot-work, often combined with figures.

During the mediæval period wayside crosses became still more numerous. They were placed by the side of the most frequented roads, especially where two or more roads met, to excite holy aspirations in every passer-by. They were raised on the wild, dreary moor, by the lonely foot-path, to cheer and encourage the weary, solitary traveller, by reminding of "Him who is as a hiding-place from the wind and a covert from the tempest." They were placed over, or near to, the forest-well to betoken the purity of its waters; they were reared as guide-posts to direct the pilgrim to his destined object; they were used as boundary-marks to parishes and counties; and they were erected to commemorate events associated with the places where they stood. The primary object of these crosses is thus quaintly given by an old writer in 1496: "For this reason ben crosses by ye way, that whan folk passynge see the crosses they sholde thynke on Hym that deyed on the crosse, and worshyppe Hym above all thynges." Most of these wayside crosses, as thus intimated, were intended to awaken devotion in the passer-by for his own sake; but some were chiefly designed to excite his prayers for others—for some person who had suddenly expired on that spot, or had been there killed in battle, or murdered; or because the body of some distinguished person had there rested on its way to burial. Of this class were the beautiful crosses erected by Edward I. in honour of his beloved Queen Eleanor, who died at Lincoln, A.D. 1290, where her body was embalmed, and then conveyed by short stages to Westminster Abbey for burial. "In every place and town," says Walsingham, "where the corpse rested, the King commanded a cross of admirable workmanship to be erected to the Queen's memory, that prayers might be

offered for her soul by all passengers; in which cross he caused the Queen's image to be depicted." Walsingham thus clearly points out the object of memorial wayside crosses. It was not, like ordinary wayside crosses, merely to inspire devotion in the passer-by, but to invite special prayer for the defunct person whom the cross commemorated.

I am afraid there is not a single wayside cross, or the remains of one, now left in this county, although they were probably once as numerous here as elsewhere. We all know that an Eleanor cross formerly stood at Stony Stratford, but we know not when it was destroyed, or the character of its architectural features. I believe there is no contemporaneous view or description of it, but we may conclude it was not unworthy of its fellow-erectments, though it is said not to have been so stately as some of them.

Market Crosses, as they are commonly called, owed their origin to the Emperor Constantine. "For as soon as ever he had vanquished the tyrant, Maxentius," says an old writer, "he returned to Rome, and first of all, he gave his thanks to the Author of victory; then afterwards he set up His cross in the market-place, to the end it might remain a testimony of the power of God; that whosoever did behold the same might by and by conceive of whose religion this Emperor was, and in whose name he overcame his foes . . . that by this outward means he might draw them by a little and little to think better of Christ, and so to serve Him." From this we gather that crosses originally were not erected in market-places to confer any sanction or importance on the market, but that they might be the more conspicuous objects and seen by the greater number of persons. And for the same purpose almost every town and village in England had a cross erected in the market-place, on the green, or in some other place of common resort. In course of time these crosses, whether in towns or villages, became associated with other purposes. Proclamations were read at them, public and parochial business was transacted, and many private engagements effected. For the object of the cross here was to remind persons of their Christian duties towards one another—that here, where the temptation to fraud and deceit most

prevailed, they must remember Him who has said, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye also unto them." Thus, whatever was done before the town-cross was considered as especially binding and sacred. During the Commonwealth market crosses were used for a novel purpose. In the year 1653 an Act was passed enjoining marriages to be effected before Justices of the Peace, and by virtue of this Act the banns of matrimony were often published, and some marriages celebrated, at market crosses. We may conclude that, to prevent these marriages from any semblance of a religious character, the crosses were previously deprived of the Christian symbol.

Market and village crosses appear originally to have been very plain and simple, like the Quainton cross. Afterwards they were ornamented; then elaborately constructed and decorated, resembling the Eleanor crosses; and, finally, after the decay of architecture, they became mere market-houses, more or less ugly, but still bearing the name of market cross, as many hideous market-houses do to the present day. The market cross at Leighton Buzzard is a handsome structure; but the most beautiful and magnificent one I know is that at Winchester. Some towns had two or more crosses, as Sandbach, which has two standing together; and Leland speaks of three at Brackley, in different parts of the town, probably where different markets were held.

I know of but two market crosses now existing in this county—those of Buckingham and Quainton. The Quainton cross apparently occupies its original position, and is in the best state of preservation, though it has been sadly neglected. It is made of sand or grit-stone, its shaft is octagon, and, though deprived of its head and arms, is four feet three inches high from the pedestal step, and eight feet six inches from the surrounding ground. The bottom step is about eight feet square, and sixteen inches high. There is no sculpture or ornamentation whatever about it. But plain though it be in itself, it is ornamental to the village, and well deserves to receive from the inhabitants a little more care and attention.

The market cross at Buckingham is chiefly remarkable for its wandering propensities, and its travels and adven-

tures have been so well narrated by the Rev. Henry Roundell, late vicar of Buckingham, that I cannot do better than refer to his account.

From this slight sketch it will be readily conceived how numerous stone crosses were spread over the country. It was almost impossible to avoid the sight of them. On the public highway and by the lonely foot-path, in the busy market-place and amid the stillness of each hallowed spot, the symbol of redemption met the gaze of the passer-by, reminding him of the Christian's blessings, his duties and his responsibilities. How far this profusion of symbolic teaching would be desirable in the present day is an open question, but few will doubt its expediency in that unlettered age when printing was unknown, and few, even of the upper classes, were able to read manuscript. And if this practice became abused and led to evil, such a result is only too common with many other excellent provisions. But the relics of these ancient crosses, now more in danger of being despised than idolized, are far from being useless. Sadly mutilated as they generally are, from them the sculptor and the architect may glean much of the history and progress of their respective arts; and from the beautiful designs and elaborate ornamentation of many of them, they may gather several valuable hints.

But these old relics are especially interesting to the Christian student. By them he may trace the existence of our faith, century by century, from the present day almost up to its first introduction into Britain, and thus they form a most valuable adjunct to history. In some respects the ancient cross is more convincing than history itself. It is free from the errors, the prejudices, and other infirmities of authors and transcribers. It stands forth an indubitable witness, and says to us, "Your remote ancestors who placed me here were Christians like yourselves," while their existence among us at the present day prove that neither the Paganism of the Roman, the Saxon, or the Dane was able entirely to extinguish British Christianity in our island. The destruction of one of these ancient crosses may therefore be regarded, in addition to the profaneness of the act, as obliterating a chapter of history.

And here let me remark, in conclusion, that the true

province of archæology does not consist, as some persons have supposed, in collecting relics of antiquity as mere objects of curiosity; but, in studying, elucidating, and so arranging them as to form waymarks to the historian that he may travel back through the past ages without materially deviating from the beaten track of our ancestors.
