

STANDING CROSSES

(English Heritage Monument Class Description)

Alternative, colloquial and related terms: Boundary cross; Churchyard cross; Eleanor Cross; Market cross; Preaching cross; Wayside cross.

1. Definition

A standing cross is a free-standing upright structure which bears a head consisting of the arms of a cross, lantern, globe, or finial. Crosses vary in their degree of elaboration, ranging from simple orthostats to highly ornate constructions. Components to be expected of the simpler types include a base (which is frequently stepped), a shaft (which may be monolithic or of jointed masonry), and a head, which may be cruciform, spherical, or an ornamental lantern. Crosses of more complex type may take the form of an embellished pinnacle or spire (generally of receding tiers with a small cross or finial at the apex), or crosses where the shaft is raised upon an open-sided shelter. Surviving standing crosses are almost invariably made of stone, although it is known that many former crosses were made of wood and have since disappeared.

Standing crosses are to be distinguished from high crosses of pre-Conquest date, pre-Conquest grave memorials, and from those later- and post-medieval market crosses which tended towards the form of open-sided market halls. Although the simpler monolithic standing crosses show resemblance to pre-Conquest high crosses, the latter are to be differentiated on grounds of adornment and differences of functional tradition. Graveyard memorial crosses of the 9th to 11th may sometimes be confused with standing crosses, and occasionally saw re-use in the latter capacity; these are, however, a distinct form of monument and for present purposes should be disregarded. It has been argued that market-crosses which stand atop substantial quadrangular or circular buildings where the roof is supported by standards are descendants of standing crosses. Such market crosses are nevertheless excluded from the class by virtue of their architectural complexity and eventual independence of form and function.

The broad purpose of raising standing crosses was expounded in 1496 as being that "when folk passing see the cross, they should think on him that died on the cross, and worship him above all thing". In practice, standing crosses served a considerable variety of other functions, some of which were interlinked. Standing crosses in churchyards appear to have been the most numerous members of the class; they served as stations for outdoor processions and were closely connected with Palm Sunday solemnities. Outside churchyards standing crosses were used within settlements as places for preaching, the definition of the extent of rights of sanctuary, and places of public proclamation and penance. Standing crosses were also employed to mark boundaries between parishes, property, or to define the edges of settlements. Wayside crosses sometimes marked routes across difficult terrain (e.g. Horn's Cross, which was one of a series marking a medieval route across Dartmoor), and they also appear to have been used as setting-down places for corpses during funeral journeys. A few crosses were erected to commemorate battles. After the Reformation some crosses retained or developed a function as focuses for municipal or borough ceremonies. Rarer secondary post-Reformation uses included the display of heads of captured animals, and very occasionally as gallows.

Crosses were erected and used for their primary purposes throughout the period c.1050 to 1540. The emergence of the class may have been broadly coincident with the crystallization of the parochial system in the 11th and 12th centuries.

2. Date

Crosses are dated mainly by typology, based upon analogies between their features and other examples of medieval architecture for which dates have been independently

determined. Note that the accuracy of typological dating may vary according to the degree of elaboration: plain crosses may be difficult or impossible to date with any precision, for want of diagnostic features. The dating of a few crosses may be assisted by heraldic devices or inscriptions. Some of the more spectacular examples (e.g. the Eleanor crosses, battlefield crosses) are dated by written records. Others are referred to in wills.

By far the most popular form was the shaft-on-steps, which made its debut in the 11th or 12th century and retained its currency until the Reformation. Preaching and spire forms appear from the mid and late 13th century, respectively.

3. General description

Standing crosses have received little systematic attention. Most studies of individual monuments, county surveys, and works of synthesis were produced in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. The only general study of national scope remains Aymer Vallance's *Old Crosses and Lychgates*, published in 1920. Vallance's scheme of classification has for the most part been adopted here. Note, however, that modern understanding of the class has tended to question the earlier assumption that there was direct functional continuity between the earlier forms of pre-Conquest high cross, and standing crosses of the 12th to 16th centuries.

Components of crosses may be conveniently introduced from the ground upwards, rising from base to apex.

Simple monolithic crosses (e.g. those marking boundaries) may lack any kind of separate base, being set earth-fast. Others were planted in a socle: a block of stone hollowed out to receive the base of the shaft. Socles were used for some pre-Conquest high crosses (qv. Monument Class Description), and they are encountered at later dates (e.g. in the churchyard at St Mary, Stainburn, N Yorks, where the small size of the socket may indicate that the original shaft was made of wood).

The most common form of standing cross is raised upon a flight of steps. In its fully developed form this type has six components: a substructure or foundation, the steps (sometimes called a calvary), a shaft, a capital (also called a knop), and a head.

The foundation is often of mortared rubble; its form on plan may reflect the configuration of the steps it carries (see steps, below). Foundations for crosses have been encountered during excavations near churches. At Aismunderby, N Yorks., the excavation of a low knoll close to the site of a chapel disclosed a rubble masonry platform c.3m square, and generally three courses (of 450mm) deep. Excavation 16m east of the chancel of the church of c.1000 at Barton-on-Humber, Humberside, revealed a foundation of mortared rubble. The full area of this platform was not investigated, but assuming that it was square a structure c.7.2m across is indicated. Another possible cross foundation was found nearby. No direct stratigraphic link between the putative cross-base and the church was established, but it is known that the two co-existed for some part of the 11th century (Rodwell & Rodwell 1982, 300). Cross-bases have been excavated within the precincts of cathedrals and other religious communities. At Old Sarum, Wilts., excavations undertaken between 1909 and 1915 encountered a stone base c.4.3m square in the Canons' Cemetery. This lay at the end of a wall which ran east from the corner of the south transept and is thought to have been the foundation for a cross.

The steps vary considerably in their number and configuration. On plan the steps may be circular, square, hexagonal, or octagonal. At Rocester, Staffs., the cross was approached by a circular flight of three shallow steps (risers of 150mm), each of the treads being about 330mm wide. At Eynsham, Oxon, the shaft was raised upon a square platform of mortared ashlar, in effect being a single step. Loftier flights exist or once existed at Horsington, Somerset, where there was a circular flight of four steps, and Irthlingborough, Northants., where the market cross had a flight of six. Examples of polygonal calvaries are found at Stalbridge, Dorset, and the Whitefriars' cross, Hereford, where there are seven steps. Steps

were normally plain, although architectural embellishment occurs occasionally, as at Raunds, Northants., where the riser of the second step is adorned with quatrefoil panelling. An occasional feature of steps is the presence of one or more cavities, possibly for some form of offering.

At the summit of the steps there was normally a socket stone into which the shaft was mortised, usually run with lead. Socket stones are frequently embellished, the usual type being "square on plan, and its upper bed made octagonal by means of steps or broaches, in the shaping of which a very great variety is manifested" (Vallance 1920, 42). The socket stone at Wicken, Cambs., is 760mm square and 500mm high. That at Stanway, Gloucs., is 500mm tall. The socket of the large churchyard cross at Great Grimsby, Humberside, measures nearly 790mm in plan. Socket stones display a considerable range of decoration, which may include geometrical designs, heraldic shields, and statuettes.

The shaft normally tapers. In section it may be square, cylindrical, octagonal, or clustered. There is considerable variation in height, and in the presence and character of surface adornment. Rochester's shaft, for instance, is of square section, about 300mm across at the base, and measures c.3.6m high. Great Grimsby's stem consists of a bundle of four engaged shafts c.1.6m high.

The shaft at Somersby, Lincs, measures 3.65m from base to the knop. Shafts may be plain, as at Somersby, or sparsely ornamented as at Hedon, Humberside, to which the cross is said to have been transferred from the drowned port of Ravenser). Some bases were flanked by statuary, as at Dundry, Somerset. More elaborate surface treatment occurs at Headington, Oxon, where the restored shaft bears vertical ribbing; or Higham Ferrers and Irthlingborough, where the shafts bear sculptured ornament to their full height. A feature of some shafts, especially in western counties, is the presence of a niche on one elevation of the stem. Some niches contained statues (as at Holford, Somerset), but in other cases the niche was not an image housing and may have been used for some purpose connected with processional ritual (e.g. the temporary deposition of the sacrament).

The knop intervenes between the shaft and the head. It may be no more than an elementary moulding, but more elaborate forms occur: e.g. the toy architectural details at Dundry. Above the knop sits the head, which may take a variety of forms. Among these are a cross of greater or lesser elaboration; a lantern-like structure which may be flat topped or gabled, and may bear sculpture (either in relief (e.g. Ampney Crucis, Gloucs.) or set within niches); a crucifix which may be open (e.g. Wheston, Derbyshire), or sheltered beneath a gabled roof (e.g. Medley, Hereford & Worcester). Some of the lantern types carried further decoration above: e.g. the Town Cross at Cricklade, Wilts., (now in the churchyard of St Sampson), where the lantern seems originally to have been carried up into a small spire.

Examples of dimensions of cross heads given by Vallance include the small specimen recovered at Halesowen, Hereford & Worcester, which measured 480mm in extreme height by 250mm by 150mm; and St Michael's Mount, Cornwall (nearly 1m high by 400mm by 300mm).

Cross heads frequently fell victim to attacks by iconoclasts in the 16th and 17th centuries. Hence it is common to find headless crosses, and for heads to be found *ex situ* (see further under section 6).

While the cross-on-steps was the routine form of medieval standing cross, both inside and outside churchyards, there were other forms with additional ranges of components. Spire-shaped crosses show wide variation on the basic theme of a tall pinnacle, often of three or four receding stages, and often bearing elaborate architectural decoration and/or sculptured figures. The most famous examples in this genre are the crosses erected by Edward I at the stopping-places of the funeral cortege of his wife, Eleanor of Castile, who died on 28 November 1290. Twelve such crosses are known to have been built; there may have been more (Annex 1).

The three surviving Eleanor crosses display broad similarities of outline; each contained statues of the queen in niches set about the middle stage, and the lowest stage was carved with blind tracery. In other respects, however, the crosses are strikingly different. The spire at Geddington is a triangle in plan (each side slightly convex, 1.52m in length), set at the top of a hexagonal flight of eight steps. The whole is 12.8m high. Northampton's cross is octagonal in plan, also step mounted. Its first stage measures 4.26m high; the second is 3.65m; the upper portion was lost before the end of the 15th century. Waltham Cross is a hexagon on plan, and may once have stood upon a flight of ten steps. It too has lost its head, and successive renovations have purged most of the original fabric. Fragments other Eleanor crosses survive, but their forms are known only from drawings and the writings of spectators and antiquaries.

Spired crosses of diminishing stages existed elsewhere: e.g. the High Cross at Gloucester (10.5m high), and the examples known to have existed at Abingdon, Coventry (which stood 17.37m high), Scarborough, and Tottenham.

Preaching crosses were built in public places: typically in the cemeteries of religious communities and cathedrals, market-places, and wide thoroughfares. They were also sometimes placed in parish churchyards, though only the solitary example of Iron Acton, Gloucs., dating from the 15th century, survives from this group.

The components of preaching crosses include a stepped base, buttresses which support a vaulted canopy, which in its turn may carry either a shaft and head or a pinnaced spire. Plan forms may be square, circular, or polygonal.

A survey of the (much repaired) Blackfriars' Cross at Hereford describes it as hexagonal in plan and 4.4m high, with three-stage buttresses at the angles and raised upon a flight of four steps (the whole being 2.4m across at ground level). Each face of the preaching stage has an open cinque-foiled arch, the lower part being filled with an open stone balustrade. The interior has a stone bench around a central pier with six small shafts and capitals from which spring moulded ribs of the stone vault (RCHME Herefordshire, 1931, 129).

Standing crosses may be divided into the four broad types indicated above: :

A Monoliths

B Cross-on-steps

C Spire crosses

D Preaching crosses

In origin Type A is the oldest and most basic form, although crosses in this group are often so plain as to be undatable, and many examples may not be particularly old. Type B is the average . Standard medieval form - within which there was considerable variation of plan, scale, adornment, and particularly the treatment of the head. The most elaborate heads tend to be those of the 15th century. Type C made its appearance in the 13th century, is more unusual, and is now rare. Few intact examples of Type D survive.

Crosses served secondary purposes which may have derived from their primary functions as focuses of devotional and community concern. Some were the scenes of games or recreational activity (e.g. baiting animals), and post-Reformation uses could include the display of captured animals and (rarely) the hanging of criminals. Post-medieval functions could also involve cross steps as places for official proclamations and announcements.

Standing crosses played a variety of roles in relation to medieval spiritual and secular life. Almost every settlement of any size is likely to have had one, and crosses in remote terrain served not only to guide the traveller but also perhaps to reassure. Devotional use involved the cross as a station in processions, particularly at Eastertide. Some were linked to particular saints, whose support and protection their presence would have helped to invoke.

Crosses in market places may have helped indirectly to validate transactions. Crosses marked both secular and ecclesiastical boundaries and the edges of special judicial zones.

4. Distribution and regional variation

Standing crosses were generally distributed throughout England. However, their survival since the Reformation has been variable, being much affected by local conditions, attitudes, and religious sentiment. Survival has also been affected by considerations of maintenance arising from simplicity/complexity of form, and by the varying durability of the different materials from which crosses were fabricated.

Crosses tend to occur in locations which reflect their primary functions: in places of public assembly (e.g. parish, monastic, and cathedral churchyards, market places, wide streets); on boundaries (e.g. the edges of parishes and towns); and on or close to the scene of important historical events (e.g. the battle of Towton, Neville's Cross at Durham).

Some places possessed more than one cross. At Bishop's Stortford, Herts., for instance, there were six, including one in each of the four roads leading from the town. Medieval Liverpool possessed five (listed as including white Cross, Red Cross, Town-end Cross, and St Patrick's Cross). Brackley, Northants., had three, stationed on the south edge of the town, in the churchyard, and in the High Street. Crosses occur in various multiples elsewhere (e.g. at Chester (3), Oxford (2)), and modern knowledge of original numbers may be deficient. Boundary crosses could be numerous, as around the sanctuary limits at Ripon, where there are said to have been five.

Crosses with niches or recesses appear to have been more abundant in the west and south-west of England. Crosses of specialised commemorative purpose (e.g. the Eleanors) will be distributed according to the routes or events that they recollect.

5. Rarity

No national count of standing crosses has ever been made. However, the stational function of churchyard crosses appears to have been an indispensable aspect of parochial worship, and it may therefore be assumed that there were at least as many crosses as there were medieval parishes: that is, more than 8,000. This estimate must be increased in order to include crosses which accompanied parochial chapels, cathedrals, monasteries, and friaries, and those which stood in locations outside churchyards. An estimated total well in excess of 12,000 is thus likely. Even this may be too low: the high fatality rate of wooden examples and lack of record of minor wayside crosses makes it possible that the full figure was appreciably higher than 12,000.

6. Survival and potential

Comparatively few standing crosses survive intact. The base and steps are the most durable components; shafts (or stumps of shafts) survive fairly frequently; but the head has usually been lost.

Iconoclasm has been an important factor in determining the degree of survival. Cross heads therefore suffered particularly badly, and this gives the main reason why few of them survive. Iconoclastic behaviour was to some extent conditioned by regional trends in religious outlook, and this may explain why crosses survive more frequently in some areas (e.g. in Somerset and Gloucestershire), and scarcely at all in others. Other factors may have included the degree and character of ornamentation, both in relation to iconoclasm (crosses embellished with statuary and imagery being more likely to attract attack), and considerations of maintenance (simple crosses being structurally hardier and cheaper to maintain than those of more elaborate structure).

Excavation has hitherto contributed little towards understanding of this class of monument which in any case existed primarily as an above-ground feature. Substructures for crosses

have been encountered during excavations both within churches and churchyards, but no coherent study of excavated examples has taken place.

Contexts to be expected include a construction trench (which may contain associated cultural material: e.g. artefacts, broken tools) dug from a former ground surface, and a raft or platform of mortared rubble. A few cross bases are reported to have contained chambers (e.g. for use as lock-ups, as reported for the original site of Over Cross, Winsford, Cheshire). where survival of relevant deposits is good, area excavation could be expected to reveal patterns of use around a cross (e.g. paths, alignments of approach, scatters of artefacts associated with gatherings of crowds over a long period). Since most crosses stood in cemeteries, they will generally be accompanied by medieval (and possibly earlier) burials, the arrangement of which in the vicinity of the cross could be of interest.

Destruction contexts are often those which yield evidence for the cross head. Heads were frequently discarded in the churchyard, and may be found lying there or buried, to be encountered by gravedigging or other sub-surface activity. The head of the cross at St Ives, Cornwall, for instance, is one of a considerable number which have been found buried in the churchyard. It is not impossible that some cross heads were deliberately removed in the mid-16th century and buried, with a view to recovery and reinstatement if the religious climate changed. The re-excavation of such a formal burial would be a matter of considerable interest. Cross heads are also found built into churchyard walls, in rockeries, vicarage gardens, and in the fabrics of barns and houses. Where such items have been protected from the weather, they may bear traces of pigment from which schemes of medieval decoration may be reconstructed.

Records which refer to crosses include wills, building contracts, churchwardens' accounts and later parochial records, charters, deeds, and other documents recording transactions involving land bounded by crosses, borough and municipal records, antiquaries' notes and publications, graphical sources (engravings, sketches, watercolours, early photographs, maps and plans), and records of all kinds which contain relevant place-names.

7. Associations

Associations to be expected of standing crosses are chiefly spatial, although stratigraphic associations often await exploration, while links of judicial and personal character are also to be considered.

The large majority of standing crosses are or were associated with medieval parish churches, parochial chapels, monasteries, friaries, and cathedrals. These occur as components of medieval graveyards. The possibility that some of these mark sites of earlier pre-Conquest assembly or burial has yet to be tested. Other common associations are found with market places and boundaries: in some cases, the presence of the cross has been of sufficient influence to become part of the name of the place concerned. Standing crosses which marked limits of sanctuary will usually be found in the vicinity of important pre-Conquest or medieval religious communities. More occasional associations were with sites of battles, and (less tangibly) with the temporary resting places of dead magnates.

A few standing crosses make use of components salvaged from pre-Conquest high crosses: e.g. at Sandbach, Cheshire, where two 9th-century crosses were relocated in the market place before the 16th century. Another type of association is found in the tendency for makers of medieval graveslabs to imitate standing cross forms in carved designs. The cross-on-steps type occurs frequently.

8. Characterisation criteria

The four criteria for assessing class importance apply to standing crosses as follows:

Period (currency): Long-lived. Standing crosses were erected for a period of more than 500 years.

Rarity: Common. The number of surviving examples is not known, but probably lies within the range 250-2000. An original population in excess of 12,000 is estimated.

Diversity (form): Medium. There are four broadly definable types within the class.

Period (representativity): Low. Standing crosses are but one of many monument classes which characterise the medieval period.

Assigning scores to these criteria following the system set out in the Monument Evaluation Manual, standing crosses yield a Class Importance Value of 25. This lies more than one third up the range of possible values (max.= 64), reflecting the abundance and low representativity of a class of monument which was long-lived. Examples representing variants internal to the four main types, and sites of crosses where there is promise of sub-surface remains of the structure and patterns of activity around it, should be included in the sample of nationally important sites.