

## The Medieval Churchyard Cross at St. James' the Great Church, Colwall – Andy Ball

Perhaps frequently overlooked in the churchyard of St. James' the Great Church in Colwall – between the church and the Ale House - are the remains of the stone stump of a churchyard cross understood to date from the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century. This is something of an architectural specialty of Herefordshire with many examples still in existence within other churchyards.



**Colwall St James' the Great Churchyard Cross in 2020. Photo copyright Philip Halling.**

Churchyard crosses can originate from the early Christian period but the majority date from after the Norman conquest with examples being added to churchyards through the Medieval period up until the Reformation. In churchyards crosses probably served several purposes – as a focal point, before the advent of individual gravestones, to mark burials; as a focus for liturgical services and processions (especially Palm Sunday); for occasional preaching and even as a place where sales may have taken place.<sup>i</sup>

Stone crosses found within churchyards may have replaced early wooden crosses which could even have pre-dated the church buildings themselves. A statute issued by Edward I in 1285 stated that the erection of a cross was a form of legal consecration of the spot.<sup>ii</sup>

It's important to differentiate standing crosses located within churchyards with those found elsewhere that had other purposes, as described by English Heritage in their Reasons For

Designation of standing crosses. *'Elsewhere, standing crosses were used within settlements as places for preaching, public proclamation and penance, as well as defining rights of sanctuary. Standing crosses were also employed to mark boundaries between parishes, property, or settlements. A few crosses were erected to commemorate battles. Some crosses were linked to particular saints, whose support and protection their presence would have helped to invoke. Crosses in market places may have helped to validate transactions. After the Reformation, some crosses continued in use as foci for municipal or borough ceremonies, for example as places for official proclamations and announcements; some were the scenes of games or recreational activity.'*<sup>iii</sup>

*Much less common than stepped crosses are spire-shaped crosses, often composed of three or four receding stages with elaborate architectural decoration and/or sculptured figures; the most famous of these include the Eleanor crosses, erected by Edward I at the stopping places of the funeral cortege of his wife, who died in 1290. Also uncommon are the preaching crosses which were built in public places from the 13th century, typically in the cemeteries of religious communities and cathedrals, market places and wide thoroughfares; they include a stepped base, buttresses supporting a vaulted canopy, in turn carrying either a shaft and head or a pinnacled spire.'*<sup>iv</sup>



Standing crosses within Herefordshire were comprehensively surveyed by the famous antiquarian, inventor and photographer - Alfred Watkins. Watkins first carried out his field surveys of standing crosses during the Great War. Initially this resulted in him presenting two related papers to the Woolhope Club in 1916 and 1917. The first dealt with Herefordshire Churchyard Crosses whilst the second covered Wayside and Town Crosses.<sup>v</sup>

Watkins once again returned to sites of crosses with his camera in 1928 and 1929 to complete his work, resulting in the publication of a book - *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire* - in 1930. His book includes an introduction to the history of standing crosses, attempts to categorise them into recognizable groups, provides an explanation as to why so many are now incomplete, and lists a

comprehensive schedule of those that he found. His surveys included detailed notes on the crosses together with an extensive collection of photographs.<sup>vi</sup>

English Heritage claim that there were once around 12,000 standing crosses in England of which some 2000 now survive.<sup>vii</sup> Watkins' surveys of Herefordshire in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century recorded 120 in the county, of which just over 100 were churchyard crosses. 43 of these, including the one at Colwall, are now scheduled ancient monuments.<sup>viii</sup>

The Colwall churchyard cross is typical of many others in Herefordshire as it is a modest, composite structure made of local stone; in sight of a porch entrance and to the south side of the main church.<sup>ix</sup>

In structure and form it is also like many other Herefordshire examples. It has a roughly rectangular base of several steps, supporting a roughly square socket stone chamfered on top to an octagon into which the remains of part of a tapering stone shaft remain. Some of the stone shaft is missing, as is the capital which would have supported a stone head.<sup>x</sup>



**Colwall churchyard cross as photographed by Alfred Watkins in 1917.**

Watkins surveyed the Colwall churchyard cross and noted the following – ‘COLWALL. South of chancel. STEPS, square, 9ft. 0in. x 1ft. 0in. deep, worn. SOCKET STONE, square to octagon, 2ft.

10in. x 2ft. 6in. high, hollow bevel corners. SHAFT, 10 1/2in., square to octagon, 2ft. 7in. stump, small tongue stop and horizontal bar above it on the bevel. NICHE, round-headed, with pinnacle decoration above opening, 15in. x 7 1/2in.’<sup>xi</sup>

The niche referred to was quite a common feature found on 39 of the crosses that Watkins surveyed in Herefordshire. Niches are found in the socket stones and are typically 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 inches deep. Usually, they are plain, but in Colwall the niche on the churchyard cross is decorated or moulded. B J Marples subsequently carried out a more comprehensive survey of niches on churchyard crosses writing up his findings in an article for the journal of the Woolhope Club in a piece titled *The Niches in Medieval Churchyard Crosses* published in 1972. For Colwall his survey recorded – ‘Colwall. Three square steps, base and stump of shaft. The base is 4-8 with concave sloping chamfers with a bar above. The niche has a bluntly pointed top with a canopy above. This has a large crocketed pinnacle in the middle and a small one on each side. Height 141 ins., width 71 ins., depth 5 ins.’<sup>xii</sup>

It is impossible to say what style the missing capital and cross head would have taken. Surviving medieval cross heads come in a variety of shapes from simple crosses to richly carved sculptural heads called tabernacles. Tabernacles can include depictions of scenes of Christian iconography such as saints, bishops, the Crucifixion and the Virgin and Child. Where intact these are quite rare artefacts.<sup>xiii</sup>

The Colwall churchyard cross is claimed to be 14<sup>th</sup>- 15<sup>th</sup> century, although these structures are notoriously hard to date. Perhaps in the aftermath of the Black Death (1348), which seriously depleted the Colwall population, the local populace, fearful of the plague, favoured outdoor areas as a venue for religious gatherings, instead of more confined indoor spaces like the adjacent church building?

If the Colwall churchyard cross does date to the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, then it is of a later date than the church itself. There is likely to have been a church on the site since Saxon times and the current building probably originated in the 12<sup>th</sup> century with several subsequent additions. The first recorded rector was Gerard de Eugines in 1275 when the church would have consisted of a chancel, the nave and the south aisle.<sup>xiv</sup>

There is little documented to record anything of the specifics of the use of the Colwall churchyard cross. Winifred Stringer in her *History of Colwall* writes somewhat ambiguously of the Bishop of Hereford preachings at the Stone at Colwall.<sup>xv</sup> Is this the stone cross in the churchyard or a reference to the (unproven) existence of a stone at Colwall stone that predated the current stone, which was placed there in the 18<sup>th</sup> century?

Churchyard stone crosses would have been very much part of village life in Herefordshire and even feature in local folklore. In Ella Mary Leather’s detailed account of the *Folklore of Herefordshire*, originally published in 1912, there is mention of the preaching cross in the churchyard at Weobley. Local custom had it that by visiting the churchyard at midnight and walking slowly around the preaching cross seven times, and saying the Lord’s Prayer backwards, it was said that the Devil would immediately appear.<sup>xvi</sup>

It is unknown what happened to the top of the stone shaft, capital and cross head at Colwall. In some parts of the county Watkins recorded that churchyard crosses had deteriorated due to poor maintenance or inclement weather.<sup>xvii</sup> However, the majority of

crosses probably fell foul to religious intolerances during the Reformation or in later waves of iconoclasm during the period leading to the Restoration in 1660.<sup>xviii</sup>

William Dowsing was a puritan living in Suffolk in the seventeenth century. In 1643 he visited parish churches, breaking up religious icons. Dowsing was involved in the destruction of relics of some 250 churches in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk as well as at the Cambridge University Colleges.<sup>xix</sup> He kept a diary of his activities in the introduction to which he quoted '*certain persons were put in authority to pull down and cast out of all churches, roods, graven images, shrines with their relics ... Under colour of this commission, they rooted up and battered down crosses in churches and churchyards.*'<sup>xx</sup>

In Herefordshire many churchyard stone crosses would have similarly lost their heads during the English Civil Wars in the middle part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, most probably in the early 1640s. The situation in the county would have been exacerbated because the chief commissioner, appointed by order of Parliament in 1641 and 1643 to destroy all crosses, was Sir Robert Harley of Brampton Bryan in Herefordshire.<sup>xxi</sup> Sir Robert Harley was himself directly involved, with considerable zeal, in the local destruction of Herefordshire religious iconography. At the church at Wigmore, under Harley's supervision, the cross was not simply removed, but '*caused to be beaten in pieces, even to dust with a sledge, and then laid.., in the footpath to be trodden on in the churchyard.*'<sup>xxii</sup>

Close to Colwall, at village of Bosbury, the churchyard cross was spared by the intervention of the local vicar as recorded by Bentley, in his *History of Bosbury* (1891 edition, p. 19). He relates of the churchyard cross '*It is said to owe its preservation, when others elsewhere were more or less destroyed, to the circumstance that the then Vicar of Bosbury (Rev. G. Wall), pleaded for it successfully with the captain of the Parliamentary soldiers who were sent to mutilate it, the condition being imposed that the words— HONOUR NOT THE X BUT HONOUR GOD FOR CHRIST— should be engraved on it.*'<sup>xxiii</sup>



**Bosbury Churchyard Cross as photographed by Alfred Watkins in 1917**

That was an act of considerable bravery considering how badly clergy with Royalist sympathies, were treated by Parliamentarians during the English Civil Wars. Walker chronicled their fate at the time. This varied considerably. The vicar of Norton Canon ‘was molested, robbed of his hat on a wet day, borrowed his maid’s.’<sup>xxiv</sup> Elsewhere, the retribution was far more severe as befell the Vicar of Tarrington – a man called Prolfe. An account of the time recalled ‘One of Col. Massey’s soldiers came to Prolfe, a reverend man above four score yeares [sic], and rudely asked him who he was for, the old Gentleman answered ‘He was for God and the King’; for which the barbarous Rebell [sic] shot him through the head with his Pistoll [sic].’<sup>xxv</sup>

There is no direct mention of Colwall in Walker’s accounts of the mistreatment of clergy. In 1647 the following account describes how the local schoolmaster Richard Walwyn had petitioned the Worshipful Company Of Grocers in London regarding damage done to the

school building at nearby Colwall Green, partly as a result of damage done by rampaging soldiers. *'Upon the humble suite and petition of Mr Walwin, the schoolmaster of this Companie's Schoole att Colwall suing or some benevolence towards repaying the schoolehouse and tiling and glazing the same being battered and in decay through the violence of the soldiery and to make some accommodation for his house for the laying up and preservation of his firing hee himself having a great charge of children and much impoverished by the warres and thereby disabled to perform the same. It is ordered that the summe of xx marks shalbe conferred upon him for the repaying of the schoole.'*<sup>xxvi</sup>

Watkins notes that the majority of the Herefordshire graveyard cross heads were smashed to pieces, leaving broken stumps, like the surviving one at Colwall. However, in some other Herefordshire locations such as at the churchyards at Madley, Kings Caple and Putley the broken heads survived and were subsequently re-united with their bases. At other churches the cross heads remain but have been incorporated into other structures. At Tedstone Delamere Watkins found the cross head within a churchyard wall, and at Yarkhill a fragment of the broken churchyard cross was found in a dark area of the church porch.

Frequently the stumps of churchyard crosses were re-purposed to provide support for sundials. In 1649 a sundial was added to the socket support of the former cross at Weston Beggard. Watkins' investigations recorded that there were historical records of 22 Herefordshire churchyard crosses having been converted to sundials, of which he found 8 during his surveys.

Watkins was very scathing of attempts, frequently made during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to create new tops for churchyard crosses which had previously lost their capitals and cross heads. His criticism centred around various deficiencies. Inevitably no records of original designs exist so the creation of replacements were likely to have been based upon guesswork; frequently new cross heads were out of scale for the remaining structures; occasionally they included celtic iconography – totally inappropriate for this county in Watkins' opinion; and in other cases the orientation of niches or crosses themselves was totally wrong.

The tradition of building stone standing crosses on or near churches found renewed favour in the twentieth century due to the world wars. In Colwall the design of the medieval churchyard cross was echoed with the provision of the Colwall War memorial in the memorial garden close to St. James the Great Church. The monument was built in 1920 to commemorate the fallen during the Great War, with further additions made following World War Two. Its stepped design, with pedestal, tapering shaft and stone calvary cross shares many features with its older, churchyard standing stone relative.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The Colwall churchyard cross was Grade II\* listed in 1952 under List Entry Number 1349729. The listing description is *'Churchyard cross C14-C15. Sandstone, 3 steps to base, topped by stone block, chamfered on top corners, semi-circular headed niche to west face. Above the block the stump of a shaft. This type of cross occurs at Coddington (q.v) Clifton-upon-Teme – cf under Clifton upon-Teme CP. Listing NGR: S07392242292.'*<sup>xxviii</sup>

Perhaps then, in Colwall it's fortunate that not only are there the remains of a historic churchyard cross originating from medieval times, but that also, in its current condition, it is evidence of an important part of English history when religious tolerance was far less evident than it is now.

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- <sup>i</sup> Leigh, J (2019) *Churchyard crosses, especially in Herefordshire*. Available at <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/churchyard-crosses-especially-in-herefordshire/> (Accessed 25 April 2024).
- <sup>ii</sup> Green, E (2005) *Stone Crosses*. Available at <https://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/stone-crosses/stone-crosses.htm> (Accessed 25 April 2024).
- <sup>iii</sup> Derbyshire County Council (2024) *Derbyshire Historic Environment Record – Scheduled Monument: STANDING CROSS, CLOWNE (1011851)* Available at <https://her.derbyshire.gov.uk/Designation/DDR291> (Accessed 25 April 2024)
- <sup>iv</sup> Derbyshire County Council (2024) *Derbyshire Historic Environment Record – Scheduled Monument: STANDING CROSS, CLOWNE (1011851)* Available at <https://her.derbyshire.gov.uk/Designation/DDR291> (Accessed 25 April 2024)
- <sup>v</sup> Shoemith, R, Shoemith J, Watkins A (2020) *Alfred Watkins' Herefordshire – In His Own Words and Photographs*. Eardisley: Logaston Press
- <sup>vi</sup> Watkins, A (1930) *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire*. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd
- <sup>vii</sup> Derbyshire County Council (2024) *Derbyshire Historic Environment Record – Scheduled Monument: STANDING CROSS, CLOWNE (1011851)* Available at <https://her.derbyshire.gov.uk/Designation/DDR291> (Accessed 25 April 2024)
- <sup>viii</sup> Leigh, J (2019) *Churchyard crosses, especially in Herefordshire*. Available at <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/churchyard-crosses-especially-in-herefordshire/> (Accessed 25 April 2024).
- <sup>ix</sup> Watkins, A (1930) *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire*. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd
- <sup>x</sup> Watkins, A (1930) *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire*. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd
- <sup>xi</sup> Watkins, A (1930) *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire*. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd
- <sup>xii</sup> Marples, B J (1972) *The Niche In Medieval Churchyard Crosses*.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Leigh, J (2019) *Churchyard crosses, especially in Herefordshire*. Available at <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/churchyard-crosses-especially-in-herefordshire/> (Accessed 25 April 2024).
- <sup>xiv</sup> St James the Great Colwall and All Saints Coddington (2024) *History of Saint James the Great Church*. Available at <https://wombat-magenta-42ef.squarespace.com/history-st-james>
- <sup>xv</sup> Stringer, W.C. () *History Of Colwall*.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Leather, E M (1912) *The Folk-lore of Herefordshire*. Hereford: Jakeman and Carver.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Watkins, A (1930) *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire*. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd
- <sup>xviii</sup> Leigh, J (2019) *Churchyard crosses, especially in Herefordshire*. Available at <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/churchyard-crosses-especially-in-herefordshire/> (Accessed 25 April 2024)
- <sup>xix</sup> Wikipedia (2024) *William Dowsing*. Available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Dowsing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Dowsing) (Accessed 26 April 2024)



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- <sup>xx</sup> Watkins, A (1930) *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire*. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd
- <sup>xxi</sup> Watkins, A (1930) *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire*. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd
- <sup>xxii</sup> Spraggon, J (2000) *Puritan Iconoclasm in England 1640-1660*. Thesis submitted for degree of Ph. D. at University of London 2000.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Watkins, A (1930) *The Old Standing Crosses of Herefordshire*. London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ross, D (2012) *Royalist, But – Herefordshire in the English Civil War, 1640-1651*. Almeley: Logaston Press
- <sup>xxv</sup> Matthews, A G (1948) *Walker Revised*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Hurle, P (2000) *The Elms in Colwall 1614-2000 – Portrait of a School*. Colwall:
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Historic England (2024) *Colwall War Memorial*. Available at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1461608?section=official-list-entry> (Accessed 26 April 2024)
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Historic England (2024) *Churchyard Cross*. Available at <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1349729?section=official-list-entry> (Accessed 26 April 2024)