

St Michael's Mount, Cornwall

Repairs to base of cross-shaft on western summit



Cornwall Archaeological Unit

Cross shaft and base on the western approach to St Michael's Mount, Cornwall

Repairs to the base

Ann Preston-Jones

January 2004

Report No: 2004003

CORNWALL ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT
Historic Environment Service, Planning Transportation and Estates,
Cornwall County Council
Kennall Building, Old County Hall, Station Road, Truro, Cornwall, TR1 3AY
tel (01872) 323603 fax (01872) 323811 E-mail cau@cornwall.gov.uk

Acknowledgements

The repair of the cross-base, described in this report, was jointly organised and funded by the St Aubyn Estate, the National Trust, and Cornwall Archaeological Unit's (CAU's), Scheduled Monument Management Project: a project to which English Heritage, the Cornwall Heritage Trust and Cornwall County Council contribute.

On site, the work was carried out by Simon Barnicoat, Alan Penrose, and Geoffrey Stephens, under the overall direction of Garry Earley of Mounts Bay Developments. Thanks are due to Nigel Burnett, Managing Agent, for setting the project up, and to Lord St Levan for his continuing interest and support. As usual, the many staff working on the Mount for the National Trust and for the St Aubyn Estate, were exceptionally friendly and helpful. Andrew Langdon advised and was closely involved with the work.

Within Cornwall Archaeological Unit, the report was edited by Peter Rose.

Cover illustration

The cross-shaft supports a weary visitor.

© Cornwall County Council 2003

No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission of the publisher.

Contents

Summary	4
1 Introduction	5
1.1 Project background	5
1.2 Project aims	5
2 Background	5
2.1 Location and setting	5
2.2 History	5
2.2.1 Further archaeological significance of the western approach to the summit	6
2.3 Description of the cross prior to conservation	6
2.4 Condition prior to conservation	6
3 The archaeological recording	7
3.1 The aims of the recording	7
3.2 Methods	7
3.3 Results	7
4 The conservation work	9
5 Discussion	9
6 Conclusion and recommendations	10
7 References	11
8 Project archive	11

List of Figures

1. Location of St Michael's Mount
2. Location of the cross-shaft
3. Location of the cross-shaft in relation to other features at the western approach to the summit
4. 19th century illustrations showing the cross-shaft
5. Photos illustrating the deterioration of the base
6. Plan of the base before and after conservation work
7. Details of the shaft: the chamfer-stop and the holes for gate-hangings
8. Photo of the conservation work in progress
9. The cross after conservation
10. Drawing illustrating the phases in the life of the monument.

Summary

In an eye-catching location outside the western entrance to the castle/monastery on the summit of St Michael's Mount stands an octagonal cross-shaft, set in what appears to be the remains of a stepped base. For many years, the base of this shaft had been in poor condition; but over recent years, the exposure of the location, coupled with the pounding of many visitors, has resulted in perceptible and progressive erosion. Repairs to the cross-base were first recommended by Peter Herring in his 1993 *Archaeological Evaluation of St Michael's Mount*; but it was not until ten years later, in May 2003, that the work finally took place.

When the work was undertaken, disturbance to the existing monument was kept to a minimum in order to maintain the stability of the shaft, which has a pronounced lean. Nevertheless, from a minor investigation of the depth of the shaft in advance of the work and a watching brief carried out while the base was being restored, it was concluded that the shaft is not *in situ*. It may once have stood on a higher stepped base, perhaps located outside the chapel, but since that time has been re-used at least twice as a gatepost. In its present position, it appears to have been inserted into an area of paving associated with an open courtyard within the medieval curtain wall; the chamfered coping stones set around it, as though to create a formal base, may in fact have been added later, to stabilise the shaft once it started to lean.

The restoration involved removing and re-setting the two existing coping stones, and adding two further blocks of granite to create a square base around the shaft. The four stones were kept tight around the bottom of the shaft, in order to provide support for the leaning shaft. The top of the base was finished with turf.

The cross, which is located at NSW 51402 29830, is number 29188 in Cornwall County Council's Historic Environment Record and National Trust Number 91521.

1 Introduction

1.1 Project background

This project has a history which is almost as old as the Mount! When the *Archaeological Evaluation of St Michael's Mount* was undertaken in the early 1990s, it was noted that the cross shaft to the west of the castle 'appears stable but the base is being gradually eroded by visitors'. One of the recommendations arising was that the base of the cross 'ought to be consolidated' (1993, 74). To this end Peter Herring, the author of the report, first took Ann Preston-Jones to look at the problem in 1997. At this time, cobbling was taking place in the same general area, and it was envisaged that the base could be repaired at the same time. In the event, work on the cobbling was suspended, the cross-base repairs never took place, and it was not for another three years and the arrival of a new managing agent for the Mount, that negotiations were re-opened. However, although the repair of the base was in theory a small and simple job, the amount of effort, organisation and cost of any work on the Mount is way beyond that which would be the case on the mainland. Apart from the difficulties in getting materials onto site, there are factors like tides, weather, and the numbers of visitors to take account of. Hence it was to be another three years and several meetings later before the work was finally achieved.

1.2 Project aims

- The principal aim of the project was to prevent any further erosion to the base of the cross by rebuilding the missing sections in a style which matched the existing.
- As this work would involve disturbing the ground in an area where prehistoric, early medieval and medieval pottery have been discovered (see Herring 2000, 92 – 99), archaeological recording was to take place both before and while the work took place, to ensure that no information, however slight, would be overlooked or lost without record.
- A further aim was to answer questions about the nature of the monument and its relationship to the curtain wall of the castle. For example, is the cross *in situ* (as suggested by Herring 2000, 78 – 82) or has it been moved from its original location, as the existence of holes for gate-hangings in the side would suggest?

2 Background

2.1 Location and setting

The cross shaft is now seen to stand in a conspicuous location, on the western part of summit, where it is depicted in many historic views of St Michael's Mount (for example Fig 3) and is seen (or walked over, leant against or sat on! – see front cover) by all visitors to the castle. Historically, it lies to the west of the church, within a curtain wall which once defined an open court to the west of the main entrance to the castle - which is still the main point of entry for visitors today.

2.2 History

It is uncertain whether the monument is *in situ*, but it may have been in its present position for at least 270 years. In 1731, on a visit to the Mount, William Borlase recorded 'a small

cross standing upon 2 square steps of stone' (Herring 1993, 74 and Appendix VI). From its context in Borlase's description, it seems likely that he was referring to this stone. On the other hand, illustrations by Nicholas Prideaux, dated 1716 and 1727, and on display at the Mount, do not appear to show it. A watercolour by John Nixon, dated 1812, is the first undoubted illustration of the shaft standing where it is now, and already leaning, and it appears on various subsequent illustrations, such as that by Piers St Aubyn (Fig 4). On the other hand, there are a couple of features which suggest that it may have been moved, since it was originally set up. Drill-holes in the side of the shaft are a clear indication that it was used at some time as a gate-post or door-jamb. Moreover, the base may not be original: a chamfered shaft of this sort would normally be supported on a solid, square granite base-stone, itself perhaps then set upon a further plinth or set of steps.

A recent, detailed survey of the western approaches to the summit of St Michael's Mount has shown that the cross-shaft has a close relationship to the 12th or 13th century curtain wall of the medieval castle (Herring 2001, 78-81, and see Fig 3, where the curtain wall is feature 91550). It actually sits in the south-west corner of a former open court defined by the curtain wall, where it is believed by Herring (2000, 78) to have been deliberately set in medieval times, to act as a 'reminder that the building being approached ... was a priory as well as a castle'. Herring further suggests that the re-use of the shaft as a gate/door-post took place with the cross-shaft still *in situ*, during the Civil War, when the Royalists installed new fortifications on the Mount and possibly created a new way through the curtain wall at this point (Herring 2000, 80). Alternatively, the shaft could have been brought to this spot for that purpose. The upper, chamfered granite, step of the base is likely to have been installed after this door/gateway had fallen out of use, perhaps to help stabilise the leaning shaft.

These are issues that were partly illuminated during the restoration of the cross-base.

2.2.1 Further archaeological significance of the western approach to the summit

Archaeological investigation in advance of cobbling works on the western summit in 1997 produced finds of all periods from late prehistoric to modern times, highlighting the potential of the site and emphasising the importance of very careful recording whenever the ground is broken. Of particular significance was the discovery of six sherds of 5th/6th century imported Mediterranean pottery, similar to that discovered at Tintagel, and pointing to the distinct possibility that St Michael's Mount, like Tintagel, was a Dark Age citadel – a court of the royal rulers of early post-Roman Cornwall (Herring 2000, 47, 120–2).

2.3 Description of the cross prior to conservation

Prior to the commencement of the work described in this report, the cross consisted of a 1.4m high tapering octagonal granite shaft, standing off-centre and leaning slightly in the remains of a two-stepped rectangular (2.3m x 1.6m) stone pedestal, the lower step formed of irregular granite paving, the upper of two chamfered rectangular blocks of granite (Fig 5: presumably there would have been four originally, if it was symmetrical).

2.4 Condition prior to conservation

If it is assumed that at one time, the upper part of the base was completed with four chamfered blocks of granite to create a square, then it is now severely denuded, to the extent that two-thirds to one half has disappeared. (Though Malcolm Earley, who has worked on the Mount for forty years or so, says that there have only been two chamfered stones for as long as he can remember.) Monitoring over the last ten years confirms the

fact that erosion to the surviving portion of the base is active and ongoing and that stones and earth are being slowly but progressively lost from the base, presumably as a result of visitor erosion (see Fig 6).

3 The archaeological recording

Archaeological recording was undertaken, prior to the restoration of the base, and a careful watch was maintained once the work was under way.

3.1 The aims of the recording

- Firstly, to ensure that any information relating to the prehistoric and early medieval occupation of St Michael's Mount was not lost without record.
- Secondly, to make a record of the monument before and after restoration.
- Thirdly, to answer some specific questions about the shaft and its relationship to the castle's medieval curtain wall, for example:
 - Is the cross shaft *in situ*? Or has it been moved (as the drill holes in the sides possibly suggest)?
 - The base appears to be a composite feature, built in two stages. The lower might be original but the top looks as though it is constructed of re-used chamfered granite blocks, laid around the pre-existing shaft, perhaps to stabilise it. Is this indeed the case?
 - Is the shaft buried into the lower part of the base?
 - Is the monument indeed a cross-shaft? A tapering octagonal cross-shaft of this sort would normally have chamfer-stops near the base, but none are visible, though they may be buried.

3.2 Methods

Plan

Plan the cross and both layers of the cross-base at a scale of 1:10, before and after the work.

Excavation

Following liaison with the contractor to establish the likely extent of disturbance, any areas likely to be affected by the restoration work to be recorded archaeologically before they are removed, to record any stratification or features and retrieve any artefacts.

Watching brief

Watching brief to record any features revealed in the process of rebuilding the cross-base, and to advise on the character of the restoration.

Photography

Photograph the cross-base in black and white and colour slides, before during and after the work.

3.3 Results

The base and shaft were surveyed in July 2002, and the resultant drawing used to create a plan for the proposed restoration. The final plan, an amended version of the original, was

made after the work had been completed, in June 2003 (see Fig 6). Before and after photos were taken at the same time as the surveying took place.

Other recording was slightly more haphazard, with complications being caused by uncertainty over exactly how the restoration would be undertaken, by unfavourable weather conditions, and limited time. Nevertheless, a certain amount of information was retrieved, which allows the history of the stone to be reviewed. The main results of the recording are summarised below:

1. No material relating to the early medieval period on the Mount was retrieved.
2. The top part of a chamfer stop was discovered at the bottom of the shaft. This was not visible prior to the restoration and is not visible now, as it was sunk below the level of the lower, 'paving', element of the base. This was found as a result of a small 'sondage', dug to check for the depth to which the shaft was buried and to allow for an assessment of the shaft's future stability to be made. The stop appears to be a circular raised boss or ball, approximately 8 centimetres in diameter (Fig 7).
3. The cross-shaft was found to have a total height of 1.75 metres. Of this, a length of 28 centimetres is below the level of the paving element of the 'base'. This was not its full original height: it was found to be broken at the bottom, across the chamfer stop. Such a fracture might have resulted from the cross-shaft being broken out of its original base-stone.
4. When the upper part of the base (the two chamfered granite blocks) was lifted from the south side, it was observed that the lower level of the 'base' had been disturbed in the area around the shaft, presumably to allow the shaft to be inserted. Regrettably, circumstances did not allow this to be planned properly. It was therefore considered that the lower part of the 'base' might have been paving associated with the medieval court, and into which the shaft had been inserted at a later, probably post-medieval date. On the other hand, the fact that the paving shows a neat edge on three sides of the cross does suggest a deliberate arrangement to form a base. Two sides (the west and the south) could be seen to respect the medieval curtain wall, but the third, east side, has no such relationship.
5. On the north side of the shaft, the bedrock was very close to the surface (the paving is absent here, presumably as a result of erosion) and here, the bedrock appeared to have been cut in the same way as the paving to the south, in order to allow the shaft to be set into the ground.
6. In section (ie in the eroded north side of the base) it was seen on cleaning away loose material that the hole into which the shaft was set in the paving/bedrock was packed with earth and slates, wedged in vertically around the shaft, to help keep it upright.
7. The chamfered granites stones were set slightly above the level of the paving, on a layer of earth and stone of thickness varying between 5 and 10 centimetres. It was considered that this might be the result of levelling of the uneven bottoms of the coping stones, but might (perhaps more likely) have been the result of placing the coping stones around the shaft after earth and other materials had accumulated around it, or turf had grown over the paving.
8. Removal of the chamfered stone on the south revealed a fourth, hitherto invisible, hole for a gate-hanging near the bottom of the shaft (see Fig 7). This shows that the shaft was used as a gatepost before the coping part of the base was put in position, and that (with a total of four gate-hanging holes) the shaft had been used on two occasions for hanging a gate.

9. The chamfered stones which form the upper part of the base are confirmed as coping stones. Very similar stones can be seen on the crenellated walls of the late 18th century battery to the NNE of the cross-shaft, while the battery of the same date directly to the WSW of the cross has actually had its copings removed at some unrecorded time. Alternatively, the coping stones may have come from the earlier, Civil War, batteries which these 18th century batteries replaced (Herring 1993, 111-5; and 2000, 89 – 90 and see Fig 3 where the batteries are features 91564 and 91565).
10. Finds from beneath and around the chamfered stones included a lot of lime mortar mixed up with rubble (not thought to have been used to set the chamfered stones on), a small and abraded fragment of medieval pottery, a bit of very worn brick, and a fragment of bone (possibly from a sea gull).

4 The conservation work

The repair of the cross-base was carried out on 15th May 2003, by Simon Barnicoat, Alan Penrose, and Geoffrey Stephens of Mounts Bay Developments (Fig 8). Although the plan had been to restore a square lower step of paving and an upper step of granite blocks, this was not in fact done, for practical reasons. Providing a level footing for the paving would have required a considerable amount of building up on the north side, and this was simply not considered practical because of the existence of a gully on this side. In the event, the upper step only, of granite copings and blocks, was restored.

The work, which was carried out on a very wet, windy and cold day, involved the following:

- The two coping stones were lifted and set aside for re-use, and the material onto which they were set was removed by hand by Ann Preston-Jones, down to the level of the paving.
- The two coping stones were replaced to the west and east sides of the shaft, and close to it, so as to provide plenty of support and stability.
- The gaps on the north and south sides of the shaft were filled with smaller blocks of granite, found in the area, levelled up with smaller stones.
- The stones were bedded in a 1:2.5 hydraulic lime: sand mortar, using NHL 5 and Moorcroft sand. This was kept well back from the face of the joints.
- The joints were covered with soil, to hide the mortar, and the core, around the shaft, was filled with stone and mortar and covered with turf.

The finished and restored base is seen in Fig 9.

5 Discussion

The shaft is now seen to be clearly secondary to the lower part of the base into which it is set, while the upper part of the base is simply a couple of re-used coping stones.

Thus the 'base' is not a cross-base at all in the traditional sense: in that it was not planned for this cross. The lower 'step' is in fact a surviving area of paving, presumably associated with the outer court of the medieval castle and curtain wall identified by Herring, while, as has been suggested before, the upper 'step' is simply a couple of coping stones, perhaps lifted from the nearby battery in order to support the shaft, which was leaning. There may

never have been four stones around the shaft. Why they were not placed symmetrically remains uncertain. There may have been a lapse of some time between setting the shaft up and putting the copings around – they were not flat on the paving and there was a small build up of soil, stone and mortar between the paving and the coping.

A tentative history of the shaft is summarised below and in figure 10. This revises and refines the sequence suggested previously by Herring (2000, 81).

1. Assuming that the shaft is indeed part of a cross, then it may have begun its life in the yard to the north of the chapel. The octagonal form of the shaft, and the chamfer stop, which can be tentatively compared with one on a part of a doorway from Sancreed holy well, considered by Eric Berry to be of 16th or even 17th century date (Preston-Jones et al 1998, 13 and 14), places it very late in the medieval period – if medieval at all. A cross of this date would probably have been set on a stepped base, of which the upper part would have been a solid block of dressed granite. A cross-shaft of this sort would normally be expected to have had a chamfered latin cross-head like that, for example, in the churchyard at Lanteglos by Fowey (Langdon 1996, 36), although Peter Herring has recently argued that this shaft could once have supported the greenstone lantern cross-head which is now displayed outside the chapel (Herring 1993, 74; 2000, 78). A lantern-head is certainly a possibility at this period, although in this case, the difference in the geology of the two monuments probably argues against their one-time union.
2. The shaft is broken at the bottom, as though it had been severed from its original base by a blow, fracturing it at the point it was sunk into the original base. A possible context for this might be during the Civil War, when the mount was re-fortified by Royalists under Sir Francis Bassett. The shaft may have been desecrated as an act of iconoclasm, or for the more mundane reason of providing a gatepost. (It was also at this time that a medieval grave slab was re-used as a lintel in the Civil War watch tower on the approach to the summit, north of the castle (Herring 1993, 105-6; site 91555).
3. After destruction of the cross, the shaft was re-used as a gatepost. This was probably not in its present location (despite Herring's suggestion that this was the case - 2000, 80). As it stands now, the hangings would have been facing towards the curtain wall, and simply could not have functioned efficiently.
4. At some point, perhaps in the late 17th or early 18th century, the shaft was set up in its present position. The reason for this is not known, but if we assume that Borlase's description was accurate, then it must have been prior to 1731.
5. In fact, Borlase's description suggests that the coping stones may also have been added to help stabilise the base before his visit, for he remarks upon 'a small cross standing upon 2 square steps of stone' (above, 5). He does not say whether it was leaning at this date, but if the copings had been added by then, and the reason for this was indeed to help stabilise a lean, then we may assume that it was. Certainly it was leaning by the early 19th century (Fig 4) and so far as we can tell, it has remained so ever since.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

As a result of this small piece of conservation work, a little more light has been shed on a tiny fragment of the Mount's history. The results suggest that this stone has only been in this location for the last three hundred years or so, even though many modern visitors know it as the 'St Michael Stone', and venerate it as the place where the Archangel Michael made his appearance on the Mount! It is also believed to be the focus of the St Michael ley

line. What these modern legends in fact indicate is that even in the context of the remarkable buildings at the summit of the Mount, this upright stone, standing isolated and silhouetted against sea and sky, has a landscape value which its small size belies.

As well as enhancing our knowledge of the cross-shaft, the work has hopefully increased its stability and will prevent any further erosion. Achieving this has resulted in a slight change to the appearance of the monument, although it is doubtful whether most visitors would notice the difference.

Because of the exceptionally heavy pressure from tourists in this area of the Mount, regular monitoring of the cross-shaft and base is nevertheless recommended.

7 References

Herring, PL, 1993. *St Michael's Mount: an archaeological evaluation*, CAU report.

Herring, PL, 2000. *St Michael's Mount, Cornwall: reports on archaeological works 1995-1998*, CAU report.

Langdon, AG, 1996. *Stone crosses in East Cornwall*, Federation of Old Cornwall Societies.

Preston-Jones, A, et al, 1998. *Repairs and boundary works to the holy well on Chapel Downs, Sancreed*, CAU report.

8 Project archive

The CAU project number is **2002003**

The project's documentary, photographic and drawn archive is housed at the offices of Cornwall Archaeological Unit, Cornwall County Council, Kennall Building, Old County Hall, Station Road, Truro, TR1 3AY. The contents of this archive are as listed below:

1. A project file containing site records and notes, project correspondence and administration.
2. Field plans stored in an A2 size plastic envelope (GRE 208).
3. Black and white photographs archived under the following index numbers: GBP1591/13 – 23; GBP 1593/0 - 12 and 25 - 28
4. Colour slides archived under the following index numbers: GCS 34353 - 34358
5. This report held in digital form as: G:/DOCUMENT/HE Projects/Sites/Sites S/St Michael's Mount Crosses/St Michaels Mount cross-base report PR2002003

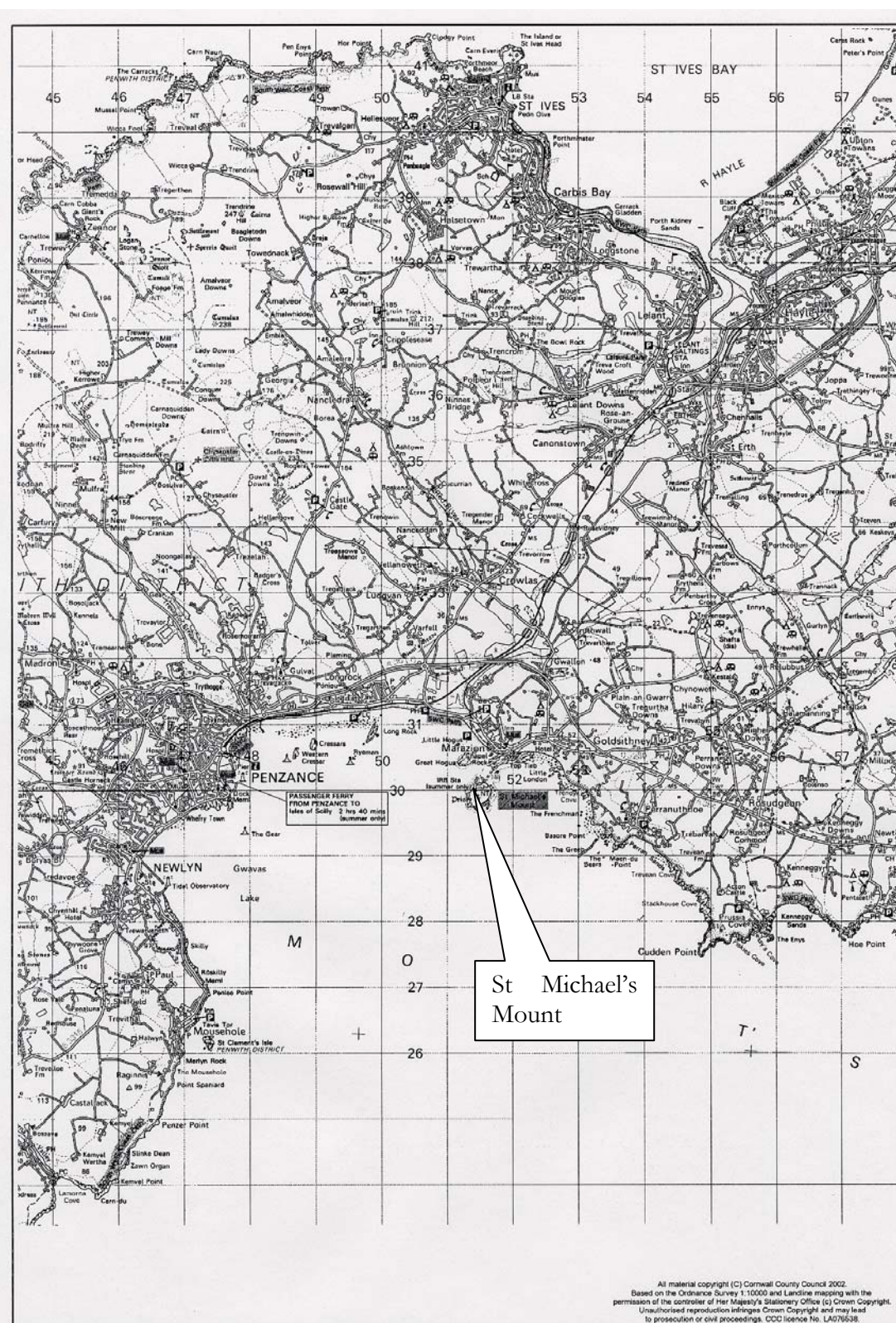


Fig 1. Location of St Michael's Mount

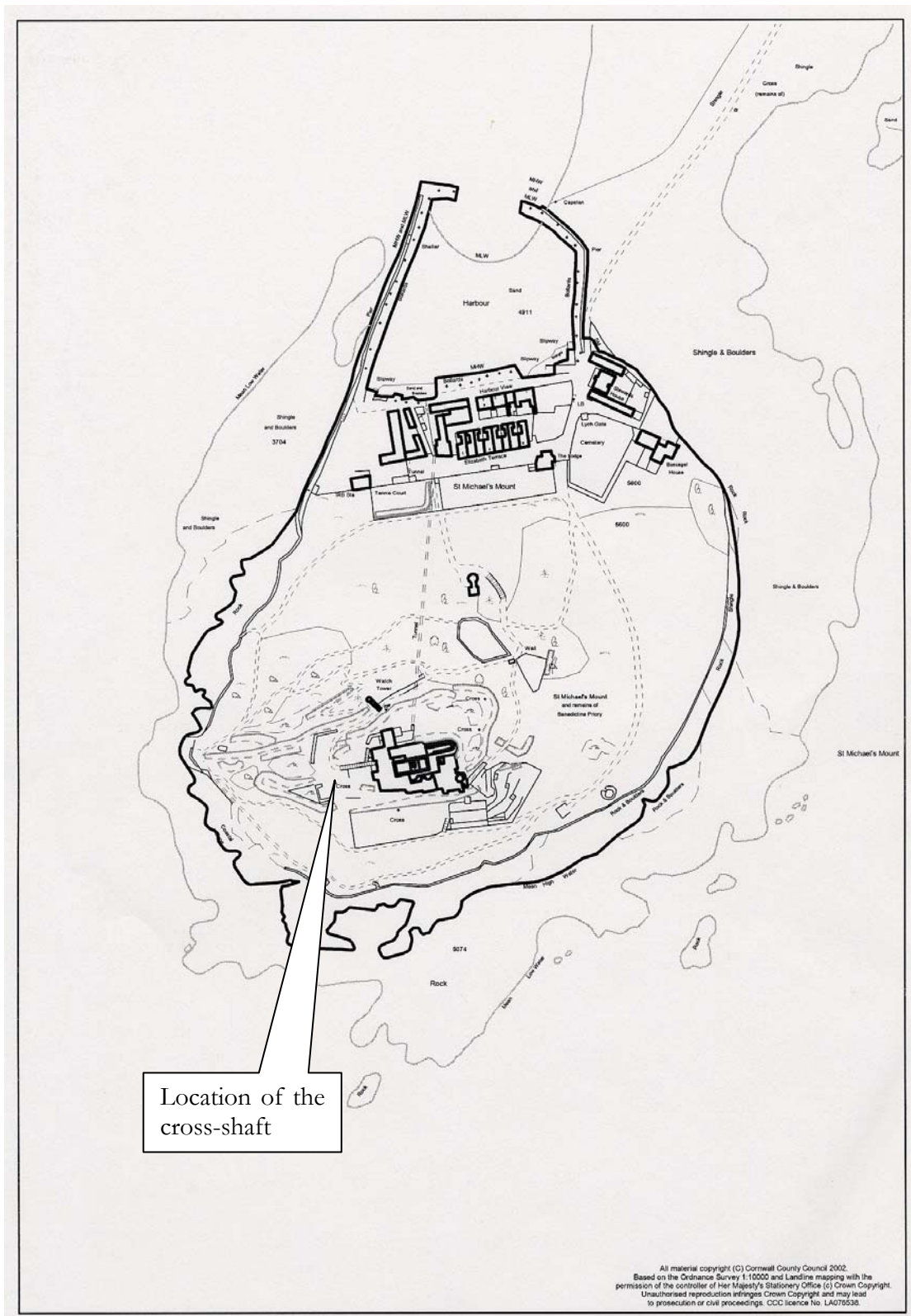


Fig 2. Location of the cross-shaft

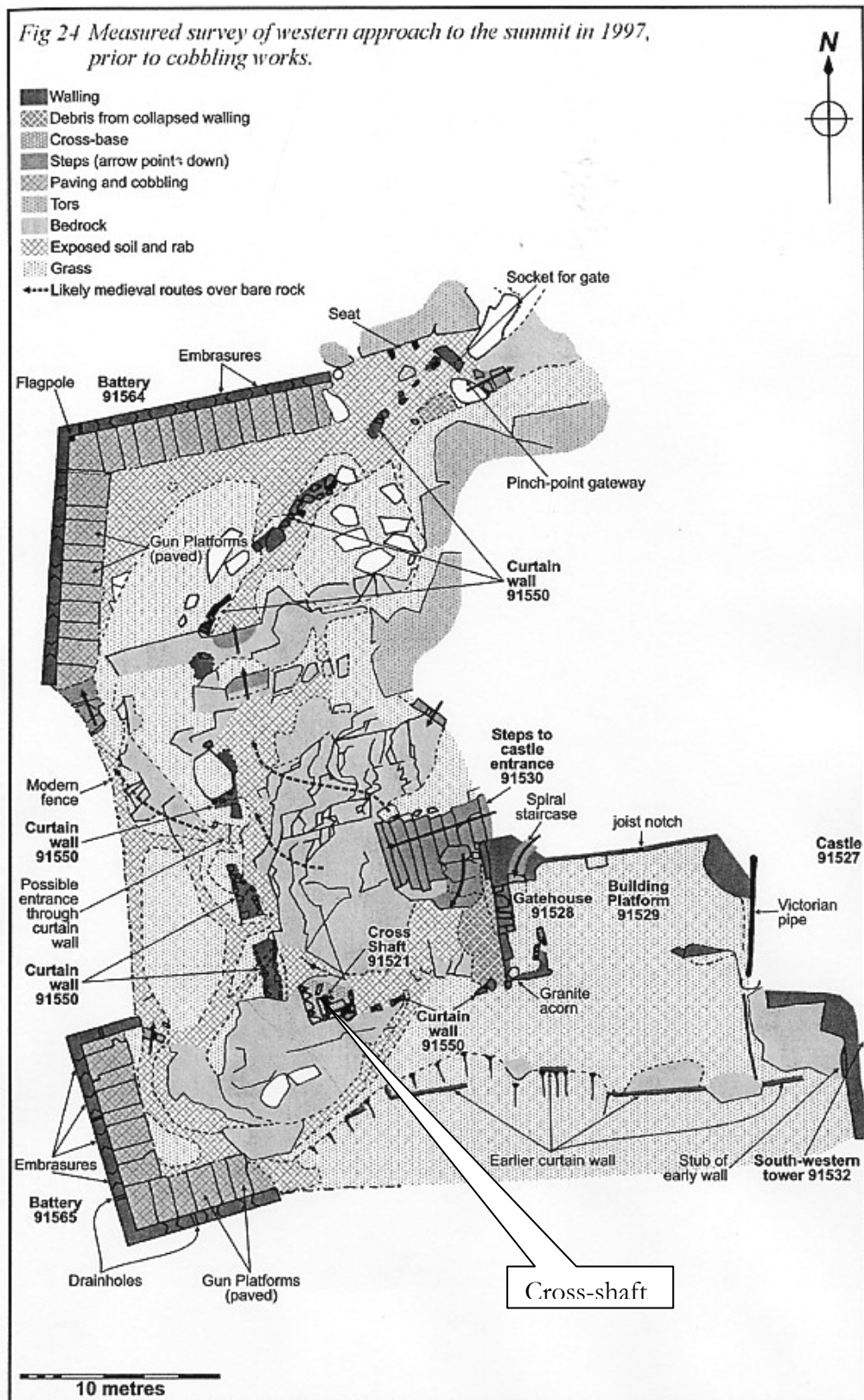


Fig 3. Location of the cross-shaft in relation to other features at the western approach to the summit (plan from Herring 2000, 79)

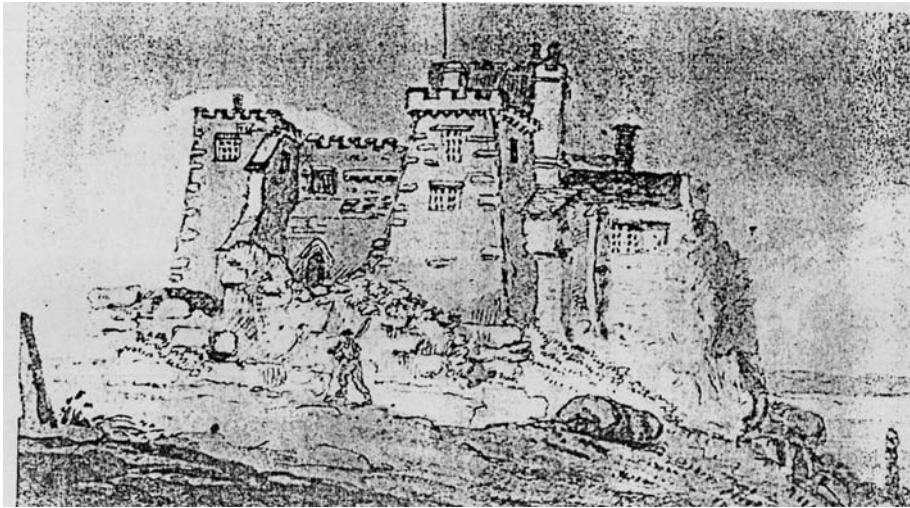


Fig 4. 19th century illustrations showing the cross-shaft. That above is a water colour dated c 1812, by John Nixon. Below is a drawing of the 1870s by Piers St Aubyn. Copies of both these illustrations were supplied by Pete Herring.



1997



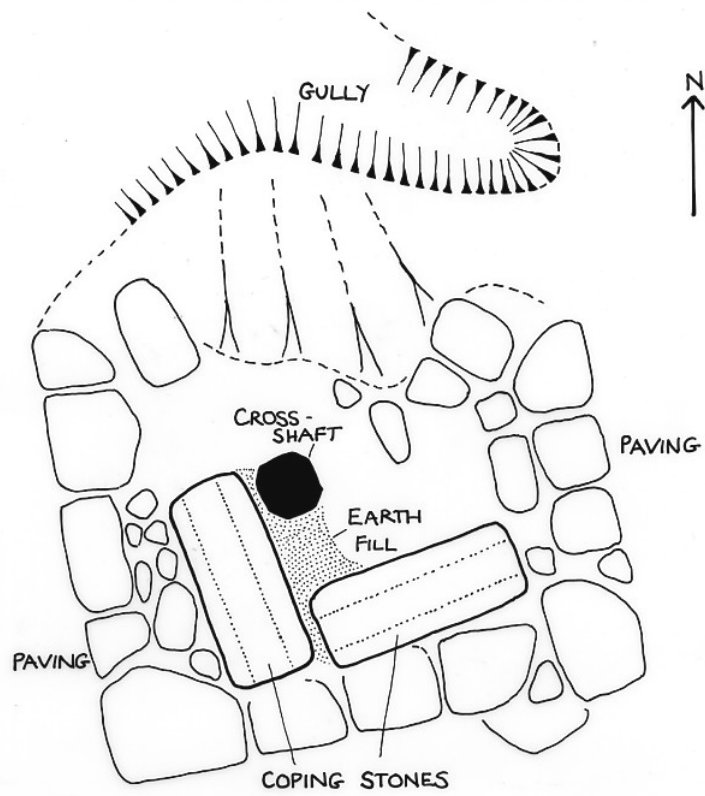
1999



2003

Fig 5. Photos illustrating the deterioration of the base

CROSS-BASE BEFORE RESTORATION



CROSS-BASE AFTER RESTORATION

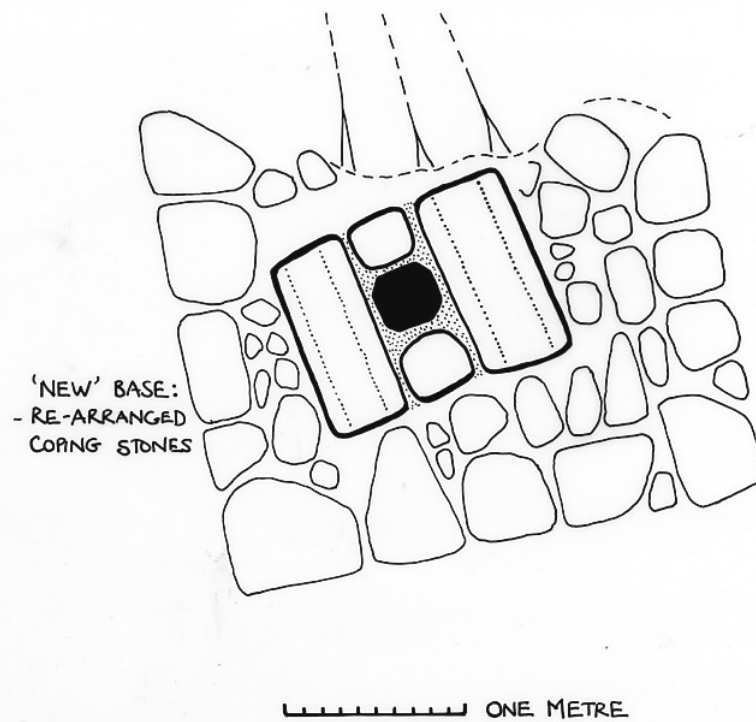


Fig 6. Sketch plan of the base before and after conservation work



Fig 7. Details of the shaft: the chamfer-stop (above) and the holes for gate-hangings (below)



Fig 8. Photo of the conservation work in progress



Fig 9. The cross after conservation

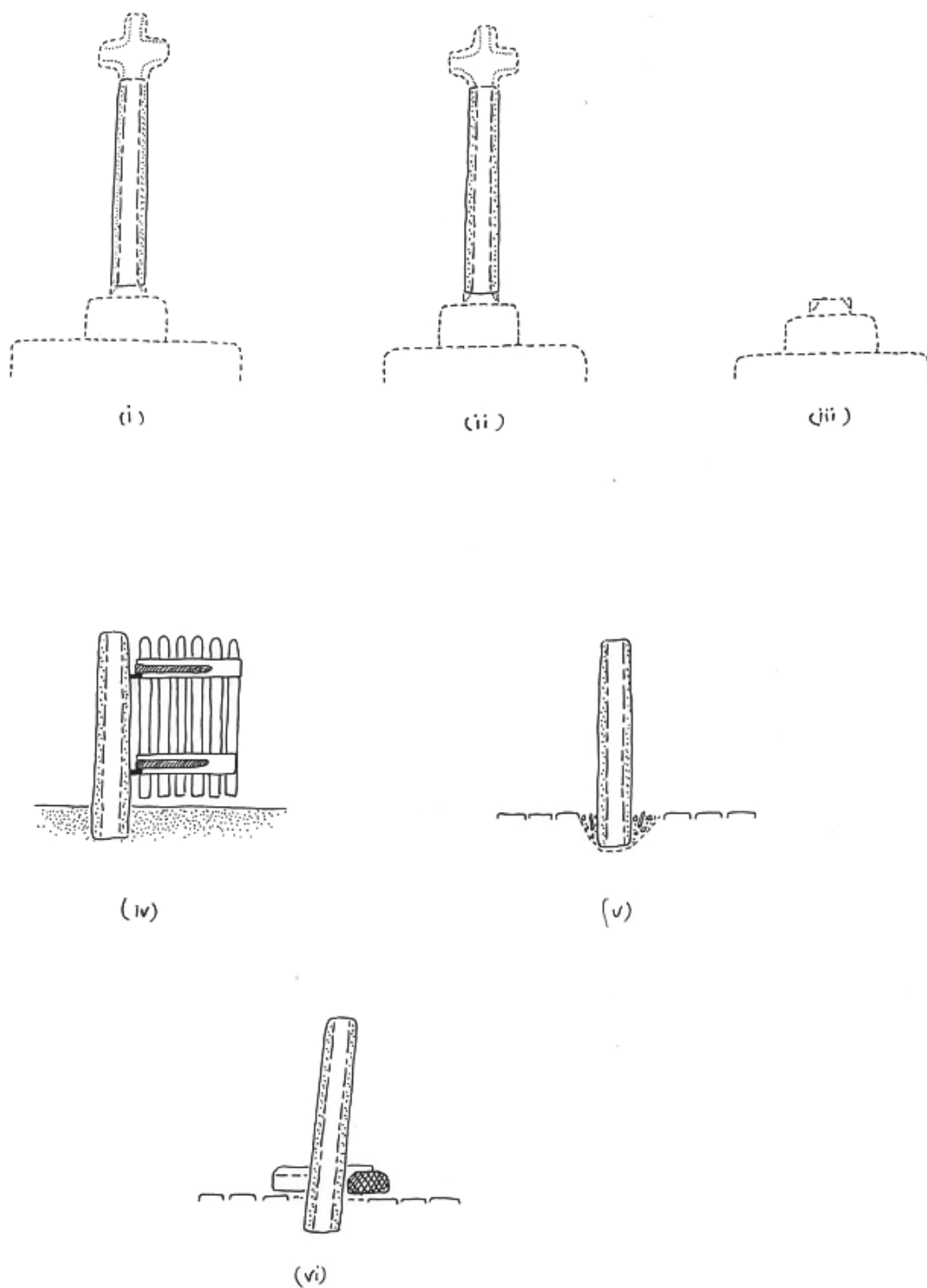


Fig 10. Drawing illustrating the possible phases in the life of the monument

- (i) The complete cross in the 16th century (ii) Shaft broken from base - Civil War? (iii) Base plus stump of cross - now lost (iv) Shaft used as a gatepost - 17th century (v) Shaft re-erected outside west front, into medieval paving - early 18th century? (vi) Coping stones added to support leaning shaft - late 18th/early 19th century?