X.—THE ANCIENT CROSS OF ROTHBURY.

By C. C. Hodges.

[Read on 25th February, 1925.]

Rothbury has been a place of importance from the earliest times of which we have any knowledge. The vestiges of the pre-historic period remaining are extensive and ample, both in defended camps and the foundations of dwellings of circular form characteristic of the ancient Britons. Burials in stone kists, as well as numerous wrought objects, vessels of pottery, personal ornaments and weapons, have been found, and show that there was considerable and continuous occupation of the site of the town and the surrounding district many centuries before the Christian era.

The Romans do not appear to have had a settlement of any kind in the immediate locality. The nearest Roman road is that branch of Dere street, known as the Devil's causeway, which traverses the county four miles to the east of Rothbury.

The history of the town of Rothbury, and its immediate surrounding district, begins in the Anglo Saxon period. The salubrity of the climate of the Coquet valley, and the great natural advantages it possessed in the abundance of food which it produces, resulted in the attraction and assemblage of a considerable population.

The first Christian missionaries, who were under the patronage of the royal house of Northumbria, were certain to fix upon Rothbury as a centre of activity in their efforts to convert the native population, to the Christian religion, as well as their Anglian followers, who settled in the country.

Although there is no definite record to show that St. Aidan, the first bishop of Lindisfarne, established a mission station at Rothbury, the words of the venerable Bede are sufficient to indicate that it was included in the

THE ROTHBURY CROSS.
SHEWN COMPLETE.

C.C. Hodges.
Delt. JUNT 1921.

WEST SIDE   NORTH SIDE
HEIGHT OF SHAFT 11FT. 9INS. TOTAL HEIGHT 15FT. 1 IN.

SCALE

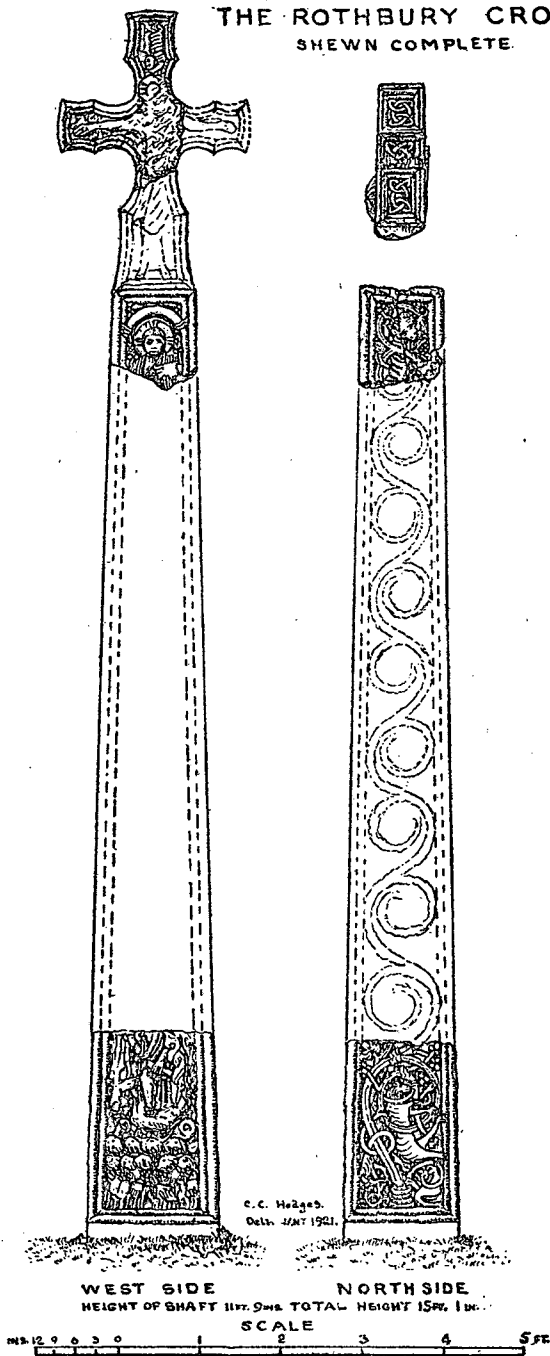INS. 12 9 6 3 0   1   2   3   4   5 FT.

FIGURE 20.

group of places which Aidan periodically visited. He says:
" St. Aidan had a chamber in the King's town at Bam-
borough, near the Rock City, and that he often used to
stay there, and make excursions to preach in the neigh-
bouring country, as he did also at other of the King's
towns."[1] One of these towns would be Rothbury, and
from this circumstance we learn the origin of the cross, the
remains of which have survived to our time. The chief
support of this theory is, that the cross was not a personal
memorial, but one of a number that were made and used
for the express purpose of affording pictorial instruction
in the story of Christianity and which were used at a centre
of evangelization before the churches that arose on the
same spots were built. These crosses may be termed,
battle standards in the conflict with unbelief.

The Rothbury cross can only be grouped with the two
great stone crosses at Ruthwell and Bewcastle, which are
fortunately almost complete, and the one at Norham, which
remains only in fragments. All are of the same period
and not widely separated in date; and all emanated from
the same school of design and work, and precede by only
a few years, the works of St. Wilfrid and St. Acca, in that
very beautiful series of monumental crosses of the type
known as the "Hexham School" of stone carving.

Before entering upon a detailed description of the
cross; it will be desirable to bring forward some evidence
of the use of the cross symbol in connection with early
Christian missions.

Bede tells us, in his account of the battle of Heaven-
field, that " Oswald being about to engage erected the
sign of the Holy Cross, and on his knees prayed to God
that he would assist his worshippers in their great distress.
It is further reported that the cross being made in haste,
and the hole in which it was to be fixed; the king himself
being full of faith, laid hold of it and held it with both his
hands till it was set fast by throwing in the earth; and this
done, he cried to his army to join him in prayer " and
proceeds " They have lately built and consecrated a church

[1] Bede, *Ecclesiastical Hist.*, Book iii, cap. xvii.

there, which has attached additional sanctity and honour to that place; and this with good reason, for it appears that there was no sign of the Christian faith, no church, no altar, erected throughout all the nation of the Bernicians before that new commander of the army prompted by the devotion of his faith, set up the same as he was going to give battle to his barbarous enemy."[2]

In the life of St. Willibald, who, we are told, " was born about the year 700, and when he was about three years old, his parents made a dedication of him before the great cross of Our Lord and Saviour, for it is the custom of the Saxon race, that on many of the estates of nobles and of good men, they are wont to have, not a church, but the standard of the Holy Cross dedicated to Our Lord, and, reverence with great honour lifted up on high.[3]

Such is some of the recorded evidence of the use of the cross as a standard of Christianity, and an actual erection as " an outward and visible sign," in advance of, and apart from, the erection of a church on any particular site. Such was the Ruthwell Cross, and in this connection it must be separated from that at Bewcastle, which is a memorial to Alcfrid, who was slain in A.D. 670.

A review of the designs of the varied forms of the cross symbol, as depicted upon a large number of grave covers of early date, and the same as adapted to the processional and pastoral crosses, borne by the old Irish and Scottish bishops, is illuminating; as it shows that the craftsmen who made them, based the forms of the symbols they fashioned on those that they were familiar with. The initial forms were those which may be termed Standard Crosses, and of these that at Rothbury is an early and very valuable example.

The great crosses of Ruthwell and Bewcastle, from their large size and majestic appearance, and the air of mystery which has overshadowed their origin and history, have received much attention from the time of Camden and the early antiquaries. In recent years several books and many papers have been written upon them. Such high

2 Bede, *Ecclesiastical Hist.*, Book iii, cap. ii.
3 H. H. Haworth, *Archl. Jour.*, lxxi, p. 55.

authorities as bishop Browne, sir H. H. Haworth, pro-
fessors G. Baldwin Brown, and W. R. Lethaby, have
thrown upon them all the light which knowledge and
research could generate. The Rothbury cross has not
been so fortunate, and from its fragmentary state has not
received the same attention from experts. The early
history of the church at Rothbury is unknown, and its
ancient dedication seems to be lost. The oldest remaining
part of the present fabric is the chancel, which is work
of the earlier part of the thirteenth century, of the bold
type characteristic of Northumberland. Almost all the
other portions perished, when the church was largely
rebuilt in 1850, and but little can now be learned con-
cerning its ancient form and details, or to what period the
older parts of it could be assigned.

The cross is now represented by three pieces, which
most fortunately include the upper and lower terminations
of the shaft, and a large part of the cross head. These
remains, and their relative position, have enabled the
writer to set out a restoration from which the orginal size
and appearance of the monument can be realized (Fig. 20).
The largest of the three stones has done duty as the
pedestal of the font in Rothbury church since 1664, and
what the exact vicissitudes through which this had passed
before that date it is difficult even to conjecture. Is it not
that it was standing in the churchyard at the time of its
appropriation, and that the upper portions had long before
been broken down and alienated? The main evidence in
support of this suggestion is the state of the surfaces of
the stones. The font pedestal cannot have perished by
disintegration, to the extent it has done, during its life
inside the church. It must have endured centuries of
weathering before it was taken in and placed in its present
position.[4]

4 The old Vestry book of Rothbury records that at a meeting held
on April 1st, 1662 (Easter Tuesday) two of the four and twenty had
gone over to the Romish Church, and that two others were appointed in
their stead, and " ordered that a cess of each man's ancient rent through-
out the whole parish should speedily be raised, collected and levied by 'the
new Church Wardens for the present year for a Font, cover of a ·Font
and several other things." In 1664 is the entry " one guinea ordered to
be paid for the Font cover and steps."

The condition of the surfaces of the other two stones is in striking contrast, and many would for long refuse to believe that all the three stones were parts of the same cross. These two smaller pieces " were found in taking down the walls of Rothbury Church during the past winter."[5] The natural inference to be drawn is, that the cross had been broken up in the Norman period, and that the stones found in the walls, had been utilized in a building at that time. It is singularly unfortunate that there is no detailed account extant of the church which was largely rebuilt 1849-50.

There is abundant evidence of the disregard of Anglo-Saxon memorials by the Normans, and the use of them as walling stones in their churches. The most remarkable case was the finding of the heads of five large crosses, and a ponderous grave cover in 1891, when the foundations of the apsidal portion of the Norman chapter-house at Durham were uncovered.

The two smaller pieces were taken, when found, to Newcastle, and are preserved in the museum of the Society of Antiquaries. These were the first examples of Anglo-Saxon stone carving to be acquired, with the exception of a piece of the Falstone cross bearing a biliteral inscription.

Such is all that is known or can be surmised regarding the history of the cross; and before describing each portion of it in detail, it will be desirable to compare it with the three others referred to, viz :—Ruthwell, Bewcastle and Norham; and to bring forward evidence to justify its being placed with them, both in the matter of date and in the high order of its design and workmanship.

There is now a general agreement that the Bewcastle cross was erected in 670 or 671, and professor Lethaby is of opinion that the Ruthwell cross is about 10 years earlier. In all three we see conventional scrolls extending the whole height of the shafts, and containing in their whorls foliage and animals and birds, on one of the four sides in the cases of Bewcastle and Rothbury, and on two sides in the case of Ruthwell. In all three, the principal

[5] *Arch. Ael.*, 1st Ser., vol. iv., p. 60.

side, that which faced towards the West, as originally fixed, and confronted the assembled congregation of worshippers; is adorned with scriptural and symbolical subjects. The figure of Christ occupies the position of honour near the centre of the shaft. The many inscriptions in Runes which occur at Ruthwell and Bewcastle, are absent at Rothbury. We cannot therefore obtain a clue to its date from this source, but the design and execution of the scrolls is so identical that we are justified in assuming that all three emanated from the same workshop, and if not all the work of the same man, they must all be placed within the lifetime of one artist. The absence of inscription also indicates that the cross is not a personal memorial, but a standard or preaching centre.

A detailed description of the three parts of the cross must now be given, with reference to the illustrations.

Fig. 20 shows a restoration of the shaft and head placed in position. Had the remains of the shaft been confined to the single piece, as is commonly the case, this could not have been done, but, as in the instance of Acca's cross, we are so fortunate as to possess those portions which were at the two extremities of the shafts, and thus the exact length can be ascertained in two different ways. One by placing the pieces in proximity and producing the parallels of their sides, and secondly by setting out the whorls of the continuous scroll which adorned its North side. Like Bewcastle this exhibits the peculiar triple bands which encircle the main stem where it bifurcates; these are found in all four examples, Bewcastle, Norham, Rothbury, and Ruthwell. Again in all are seen the lacertine monsters, and semi-natural beasts which are involved in the rolling stems and convolutions with their bodies extended through two, and in some cases three of the whorls. At the base two small beasts occupy the angles. The minor stems all terminate in leaves and fruit upon which the animals are feeding. The beast in the top stone has an ox-like head.

The south side (Plate XXII) was sculptured with a series of panels containing different subjects. The lower

one is filled with a design of very unusual character. This consists of a double scroll entirely composed of the bodies and limbs of lacertine monsters, which are biting their own and each others bodies. At the base is the figure of a man who holds the feet of two of the monsters in his hands. The top of the same side (Plate XXIII) contains a portion only of a panel with the miracle of the healing of a blind man by anointing his eyes with clay. The head of Our Lord is broken away. The costumes are loose garments, the numerous pleats and folds of which are a conventional mannerism.

The ornament on the east face (Plate XXII) begins at the base with a most elaborate example of a sixteen cord plait. The bands are narrow, well and deeply cut, and the usual centre line is omitted. The design is incomplete at the top as some of the bands have been carried into the next panel. The panel at the top of this face (Plate XXIII) contains eighteen heads evidently a portion of a much larger number, and it is difficult to determine with what subject they have been associated. The hair is parted in the centre and banded over the foreheads, and the hands of the lower figures are raised in adoration.

The west side (Plate XXII) was the most important and contained more than one figure of Our Lord. The lower stone retains about half of a panel representing " Christ in Glory," surrounded by angels and numerous human figures in adoration. The upper stone (Plate XXIII) has the top of a panel with a semicircular arched head, containing Our Lord holding a book. The head is well cut, and the hair and drapery carefully rendered. The nimbus is circular and the cross upon it is shown by triple incised lines. The arch springs from the inner member of the triple beads, worked on the angles of the shaft, both horizontal and vertical, and those of the cross head also. The small bands or cords appear at the junction of the inner angle moulding with the arch. The fruit and foliage of the upper ends of the stem are worth examination.

A comparison of the remains of the two pictures on

this side, seems to reveal that on the lower stone, about half of the subject is seen, and about one third of that on the upper. The figure on the lower was undoubtedly full length. This indicates that there were three pictures in the length of the shaft. The subject of the central one cannot be conjectured.

The upper stone is broken and in two pieces. In the top is a circular hole $2\frac{7}{8}$ inches in diameter, and $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches in depth. This has held the dowel, which secured the cross head.

The head (Plate XXIV) is incomplete in its lower portion, but enough remains to give a clear conception of its original size and form, and the scheme of its decoration. It is of the Anglian type, each arm being set out with curves of two sweeps with long radii; the ends are convex. The greater part of the lower limb is wanting, but most fortunately what is missing in the case of Rothbury, is extant in both the Ruthwell and Acca crosses, so that there can be no question as to its form and dimensions. Its elongation, beyond the lines of the other limbs, was required to accommodate the full length figure of Christ Crucified, which occupied the whole of the principal face of the head of the cross (Plate XXIV). The head of the figure is broken off, but a portion of the nimbus remains. The right arm of the figure is almost complete, and in the palm of the hand the head of the nail which pierced it is seen. In the upper arm of the cross is an angel, with a wing of very square form, and drapery in pleated folds. The reverse, or east side (Plate XXIV) of the head, is in better preservation, but the centre boss, which was in bold relief, and no doubt displayed the head and bust of Christ, is broken away, all but parts of its encircling bead mould-ing. The spaces in the four arms are filled with figures in adoration. These appear to hold musical instruments of very archaic forms. The drapery of the sinister figure is shown in waves, as though it was in flight. The north and south sides of the head are panelled in each division, and each panel contains a double knot formed of an un-divided cord (Plate XXIV).

On the upper surface of the upper and side arms of the head is a series of holes, or sinkings. There are two in the remaining arm, which are $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches in diameter, and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in depth, while the one in the centre of the higher arm is $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches, both in depth and diameter. These holes were most probably for the reception of holders for lights, the exact form and nature of which it is not now easy to determine. They may have been prepared to hold sockets of bronze for candles or for cressets filled with waxed tow to burn for a considerable time, and light up the cross when necessary.

The form of the head places the Rothbury cross in the foremost group of five of its type in Northumbria, and its proportions bring it into the first rank amongst monuments of its class. In height, it was within one foot of that of Acca's cross, and it approached the total height of the Bewcastle cross, the head of which was blown off early in the seventeenth century, and is now lost. The Ruthwell cross considerably exceeds it; as probably did the great cross of Norham. Few, if any, of the many memorial crosses of the period, would approach it in scale, and it is not likely that any one of them would greatly exceed it.

NORTH.

SOUTH.

EAST.

WEST.

FOOT OF SHAFT OF ROTHBURY CROSS AT ROTHBURY.

NORTH.   SOUTH.

EAST.   WEST.

TOP OF SHAFT OF ROTHBURY CROSS AT THE BLACK GATE.

Plate XXIV.

WEST.   EAST.   NORTH SIDE.

HEAD OF THE ROTHBURY CROSS AT THE BLACK GATE.