Stapleford Cross.

THE STAPLEFORD CROSS SHAFT

By JOHN HOLLAND WALKER.

OUR remote ancestors as far back as the Bronze Age, and perhaps even earlier, had a curious reverence for certain detached rocks and boulders. This reverence was very widespread, and we find evidence of it in many unexpected places. Undoubtedly there is some echo of it in the biblical narrative of Jacob's altar and pillar at Beth-el, in the injunction that Jehovah's altar was to be of unhewn stone, and in the story of the pillar set up by Joshua under the oak after the renewal of the covenant.

In the secular sphere we may remind ourselves of the many obelisks set up in ancient Egypt in connection with the worship of the Sun God Ra and of the rock-cut mazzaboths of Petra honouring the obscure god Ducires. In our own time many millions of Mohammedans venerate the Kaaba, which is a large cube of black stone enshrined in the mosque at Mecca, and we ourselves have an almost inexplicable respect for the Coronation Stone in Westminster Abbey, and to a lesser degree, for the King's Stone at Kingston-on-Thames and for the Brutus Stone at Totnes. Stone worship, therefore, in some form or other may be said to be very widespread and persistent.

But it was not every stone that was so venerated. The selected stones were of all sizes from quite small specimens to giants weighing many tons, and they were of all materials. There seems neither rhyme nor reason in their selection, but the constant factor seems to be that whatever their size they were all more or less oblong in shape, and were untooled and in their natural condition. In order to distinguish them they were set up on end, and were sometimes arranged in groups like the Rollright Stones, sometimes in circles like Arbor Low, sometimes in alignment like the huge monuments at Carnac, in Brittany or like the Devil's Arrows at

Boroughbridge, but more often they were left isolated like the countless standing stones which are to be found on almost every moor or wilderness throughout the world.

We cannot say what is behind all this. It may be that the cult originated from the terror inspired by some chance falling meteorite, for we know that such objects were regarded as divine, as witness the sacred stone brought to Rome at the beginning of our era by Scipio Nasica and enshrined in the statue of Cybele, on the Palatine Hill. Whatever was its origin the cult became so strong that it was able to unite solitary and wandering primitives and cause them to undertake in company the very considerable labour of erecting huge stones securely on their ends.

When the selected stones were so erected, they appear to have become numismic, and were regarded as gathering places for worship. Whether the stones themselves were worshipped, or whether they were regarded as the earthly habitat of some superhuman influence, is unknown. As far as Britain is concerned we may assume that at the dawn of civilisation the cult of stone-worship, whatever it may have been, was widespread, and so firmly embedded in the minds and customs of our forefathers that faint echoes of it persist to the present day.

Christianity came to Britain during the Roman period. At first it was of a very primitive and apostolic type, and although in the 4th century it developed the Pelagian heresy which denied the doctrine of original sin, we may say that on the whole the Romano-British church was not troubled by many theological problems. In this respect it conformed to contemporary conditions, for in those early days theology was not a prominent feature and the early church, whether situated in Britain, Rome, Syria or elsewhere, was very simple in its appeal and teaching. Difficulties developed later, and were solved or inflamed by œcumenical conferences like those which followed the Council of Nicea in 325. This Christianity was largely confined to towns,

for in spite of the civilization shown in numberless "villas," the bulk of the Romano-British people were little touched by classical culture.

When the central Roman government abandoned the province in the first half of the 5th century, it left Britain in a very dangerous position and exposed to foreign invasions, particularly from the Teutonic peoples, whose raids had been controlled with difficulty during the later part of the Roman occupation by the fleet and string of coast fortresses under the command of the Count of the Saxon shore. The best of the fighting men of Britain had been recruited into the Roman armies, but in spite of this those who were left put up so good a fight that more than a century elapsed before the invading Angles, Saxons and Jutes secured firm possession of the fertile south, middle and east of the province. It is to this period that the saga of King Arthur belongs.

These invaders were pagans having no appreciation of, or use for, urban civilization. Consequently, apart from some few exceptions, the flourishing British towns were either destroyed or abandoned. The newcomers do not appear to have been particularly anti-Christian, but their policy was to clear the conquered country and use it for their own habitation. Numbers of the native Celts were either killed, enslaved or, possibly in some cases, driven to seek refuge in the more inhospitable parts of the country, such as the Pennines, the Cornish peninsula and Wales. Among these Britons Christianity survived.

But this Christianity was completely isolated from the rest of Europe by an impenetrable barrier of paganism and thereafter, for several centuries, British cultural and religious development followed its own lines, which differed materially from that of the rest of the civilised world. Their Christianity remained primitive. Its main characteristic was the combination of periods of ascetic seclusion with outbursts of intense missionary activity, in the course of which Ireland was so converted that by reason of the multitude, learning and industry

of the Hibernian Christians, Erin enjoyed its Golden Age. In reality we know so very little about this period that modern scholars refer to it as the Dark Age, but it is interesting to reflect that early Christian writers speak of it as the Age of Saints, and that to it belong such great names as Patrick, Columba and a host of lesser saints, such as Austel, Just, Matariana, Wendrida and many others, the details of whose lives are unknown to us, but whose names are enshrined in the otherwise mysterious dedications of towns and churches. This Celtic church was completely isolated from the broad stream of European Christianity. While adhering closely to the fundamental truths of the Gospel, they progressed along certain peculiar theological lines, and being deprived of the safeguard of universal criticism and counsel they gradually lost step with ecclesiastical development elsewhere, so that when the Celtic church was re-discovered by St. Augustine and the Synod of the Oak was held in 603, it was found that wide variations had arisen. While the base rock of Christianity was the same in both churches, the Celts held different views and practices from the Romans on what we should consider to be minor points, but which were then regarded as of such vital importance that after the decision of the Synod of Whitby in 664, the Celtic missionaries were content to withdraw from England and leave the field clear for their adversaries rather than outrage their consciences by accepting the Roman use.

These early missionaries were dealing with a very primitive people, deeply ingrained with pagan beliefs and customs, which their forefathers had held for untold ages, and which were difficult or impossible to eradicate. Being wise and humane men, the missionaries, when they found that these pagan customs did not run counter to Christian teaching, encouraged their retention and continuance, giving to them a Christian turn. Probably the festivals of Christmas and Easter are the best known examples of this process. Although they commemorate the birth and the resurrection of Our Lord, it is unlikely that they represent the exact days

in the year when these events took place. They are the Christian form of the mid-winter festival in honour of Saturn and the spring festival in honour of Persephone whom the Teutonic peoples called Eastre.

Amongst the pagan usages which they had to combat the missionaries found the cult of the standing stone, and as they felt they could not banish this custom, they gave it a Christian use by encouraging the erection of these menhirs as memorials of departed Christian worthies. Such memorial stones were crude blocks with little or no dressing, set up on end and bearing very simple inscriptions, rarely more than " so-and-so, son of such-a-one." Often this inscription was bilingual, the main inscription being in Latin and repeated in that strange Ogham script whose origin is believed to be in Ireland. But the important thing about these memorial stones is that they frequently bear a Christian symbol. Sometimes a swastika was used, a device of unknown antiquity dating from early Arian times, having a faint connection with the Christian Cross, and believed by primitive folk to bring good luck. Sometimes the Chi-Rho may be found, or even the figure of a fish. In the earliest days a fish was the figure used by Christians to indicate their religion as a sort of masonic sign in the times of persecution. But more often a cross within a circle is found. In 326 the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great, visited Jerusalem, and discovered, or thought she had discovered, the True Cross. In 313 Constantine had published the edict of Milan, so that it was no longer dangerous to be a Christian, and in consequence of the Empress' discovery the cross came into general use as the Christian sign—indeed Constantine himself decreed that the wayside terminal statues of the ancient gods should be replaced by crosses. Therein we have the origin of the wayside crucifixes and churchyard crosses, which are so well-known nowadays.

A cross with free standing arms and head was difficult to carve from a single block of stone, for the head and arms were likely to be broken off while in process of carving, but a cross within a circle was quite easy to

manage by selecting a roughly globular stone, flattening its surface, carving a cross within a circle upon it, and setting it upon the top of a standing stone. Thus we get an embryonic form of the standing cross, and the circle round the incised cross was taken as a halo adding dignity to the cruciform symbol.

The Anglo-Saxon invaders came over in independent bands, each under its own leader, and from these bands the numerous kingdoms of the " Heptarchy " developed. Sometimes one of these kingdoms obtained supremacy over others and sometimes another. But they were all pagan, and it was to them that St. Augustine's mission was sent.

During the 7th century Northumbria rose to prominence, and in the reigns of Oswy (651-670) and of his son Egfrith (670-685) it arrived at a considerable degree of civilisation, one result of which was the development of an extraordinary scuptural skill in what are known as the Northumbrian crosses, for only one example of this art—the cross shaft at Reculver—is known to exist outside the boundaries of Northumbria. The lovely shaft at Bewcastle, which Professor Baldwin Brown has established as commemorating Egfrith, is the earliest of these, but others quickly followed. It is impossible to account for the genesis of these works of art which are undoubtedly the product of very highly skilled artists. The ornament, which is very profuse, is deeply incised, and is based upon the classical vine scroll and undulating scroll. Interlacing is freely used, and birds and grotesques are introduced. Further, there are carved figures illustrating biblical scenes and representations of the Evangelists. These carvings give the impression of very skilled and finished artistry, and have nothing crude about them. All that can be said about their provenance is that as the vine scroll is a classical motif it seems likely that the artists were influenced by Rome, but that as interlacing was a favourite Celtic device they were natives. It may be that some Northumbrian artist, influenced by St. Augustine's teaching, made a pilgrimage to Italy and studied classical models,

and on his return set this wonderful fashion, though who he was, or where he got his training, is unknown.

In the 9th century the Danes overran the country, and once more the land was overwhelmed in a blood-bath. Anglo-Saxon civilisation, such as it was, was almost extinguished, and another stratum of paganism was imposed on large portions of the land. But thanks to the work of King Alfred, a bound was set to the power of the Danes, and although by the Pact of Wedmore in 879, the whole of the country north of Watling Street was abandoned to the Northmen, their leader Guthrum and his followers agreed to accept Christianity. Although nominally Christians, it was long before the Danes became civilised, but in time the process was completed, and by the mid-11th century Christian usages and out-look were again normal throughout the land.

Amongst the Christian customs which attracted the Danes were the Northumbrian crosses, which they admired so much that they made frequent attempts to copy them, and although the carving on these monu-ments is crude and in no way comparable to the originals, it is very interesting and is characteristic of the Norse outlook. Moreover, remains of such crosses are very plentiful. What was the actual use of these crosses is unknown. Undoubtedly some of them were com-memorative. It is tempting to think that the primitive missionaries, finding a standing stone already well established as an assembly point for the devotion of a district, replaced it by a commemorative or inscribed stone, which, in turn, gave place to a cross of either the Northumbrian or Danish type. In later ages this in turn was either reinforced or replaced by a church.

But whatever their use, these crosses went out of favour with the advent of the Normans. Indeed, there seems to have been a revulsion of feeling against them. Very many of them were broken up and re-used in later buildings, and it is not uncommon to find these re-used stones set in such a manner as to hide the carving on them, as if the new builders were ashamed of the artis-try or symbolism of their carving.

Obviously these early monuments were the forerunners of the churchyard crosses which were a common feature in later times, and were so particular an object of hatred to the reformers of the 16th century. Such crosses were usually set in sockets, and after the destruction of the cross, these sockets were often left, forming a sort of basin for which a practical use was found during visitations of epidemics and plagues. As they had been used for worship, veneration or superstition clustered round them, and they became objects of reverence. The hollow was filled with vinegar, into which infected money was dipped, and so, by a mixture of faith and sanitation, was purified. Later the sockets were found useful for the erection of sun-dials.

The friars who came to England in the first quarter of the 13th century found a further use for the stone cross. One of their main activities was preaching, and as they had no authority over the parish churches, they set up preaching crosses as a rendezvous for their congregations. The best example of a preaching cross left to us is the Coningsby cross, near Hereford. The most important point in cross development exhibited by these crosses is that they were sometimes set up over a lower story or canopy, which gave shelter to the preacher and one or two of his companions.

The right of holding a market was a valuable privilege in the middle ages to those fortunate enough to possess it. It was ceded by charter, either by the sovereign or by the lord of the manor. Such a market was more than a mere trading assembly, it was the general rendezvous of the district, and within its boundaries public announcements and proclamations were made. It became in fact the main advertising medium of the middle ages. In order to localize the exact point for the announcement of these notices, crosses were set up, and these became known as market crosses. This was an ancient custom, for at Sandbach in Cheshire, three such crosses of pre-Conquest date remain, but in general, the surviving market crosses date from the 14th century or later,

for about that time most of the earlier ones were being replaced by more modern structures.

Market crosses were usually set up on steps, and these steps were used as counters or seats on market days. In order to protect the people so using them from the weather, temporary awnings were set up, and so popular and useful were these shelters that in process of time they were replaced by permanent structures. In this way the canopied market cross like the one at Chichester was evolved. Then a second story was added, forming a sort of town hall, and in order to increase the convenience of this chamber the circular, or multangular plan was abandoned, and a rectangular plan adopted. In the process of time the cross was forgotten or omitted, and we get the numerous market halls, like that at Ledbury. These developed into the modern civic centre which seems a strange terminus to the long journey which began with the prehistoric standing stone.

Stapleford cross, which is the finest example of its kind in this county, consists of a shaft about ten feet long and two feet thick. It is divided into three sections by horizontal bands of carving. The lower two of these sections are enriched by elaborate interlacing patterns, and the upper section presents four flattened surfaces. On the (present) south face is a strange bird-like figure on which the eye of faith may discern an ox's head, of which the bovine ears are the most prominent feature. The late Dr. G. F. Browne, bishop of Bristol, identified this figure as being the symbol of St. Luke, and, pointing out that Stapleford Feast is governed by old St. Luke's day, he argued that an older church than the present one, dedicated to St. Helen, was the original parish church of Stapleford. This may, of course, be right, but as an alternative it may be suggested that the four flattened surfaces would invite the sculptor to carve on each the symbol of one of the Evangelists, but only one of these was carved. To St. Matthew was given the cherub in human shape, because in his gospel he insists on the human side of Our Lord's

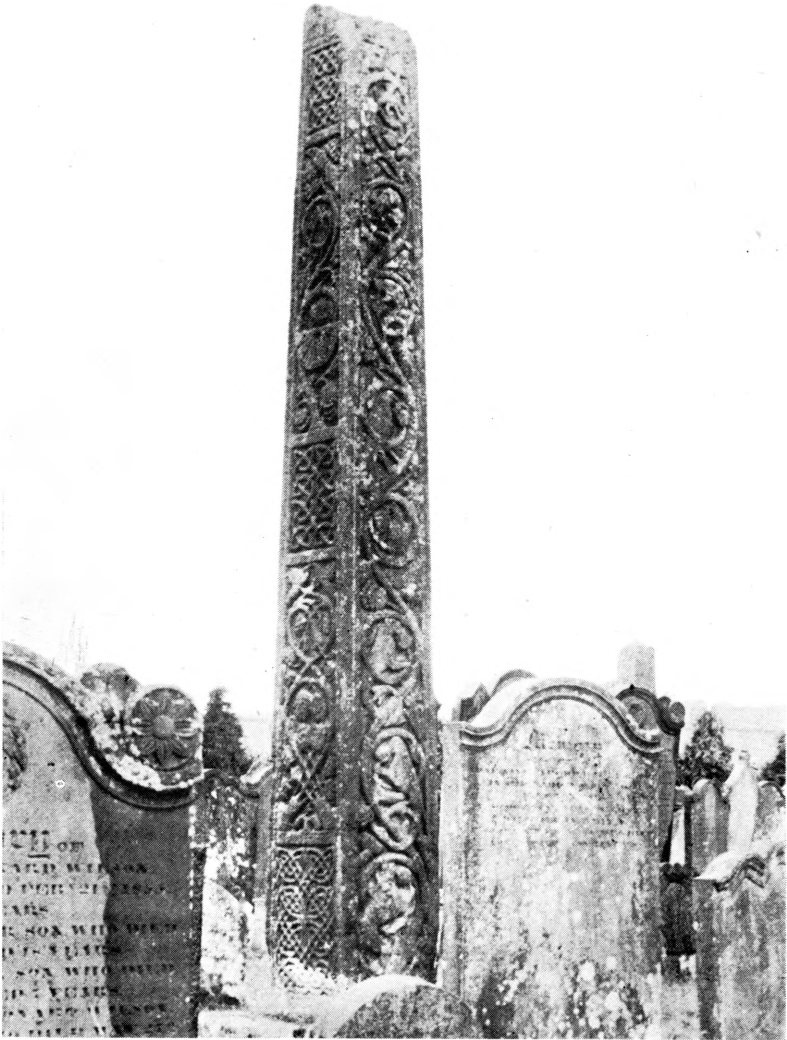
nature. To St. Mark was given the lion, because he begins his gospel with the mission of the baptist " The voice of one crying in the wilderness " and insisted throughout on the dignity of Christ. St. Luke had the ox, because he emphasized the priesthood of Our Lord and the ox is the emblem of sacrifice. St. John was given the eagle, to typify his soaring inspiration. Of these four symbols the one remaining at Stapleford (perhaps the only one ever carved on the cross) is less unlike the eagle than anything else, and it may well be that it is purely fortuitous that St. John's sign has survived.

For many years the cross-shaft lay neglected in the churchyard and its head disappeared, but in 1760 it was set up at the road junction to the south-east of the churchyard. It became an object of pride to the locality, and in 1820 was protected by being set up on a square-built base, and the present square cap surmounted by a ball was provided. With the advent of modern traffic it was found to be an obstruction, so it was moved to its present setting in 1928. The actual land on which the cross stands, together with an approach from the road, belongs to the Stapleford Council, and not to the church authorities.

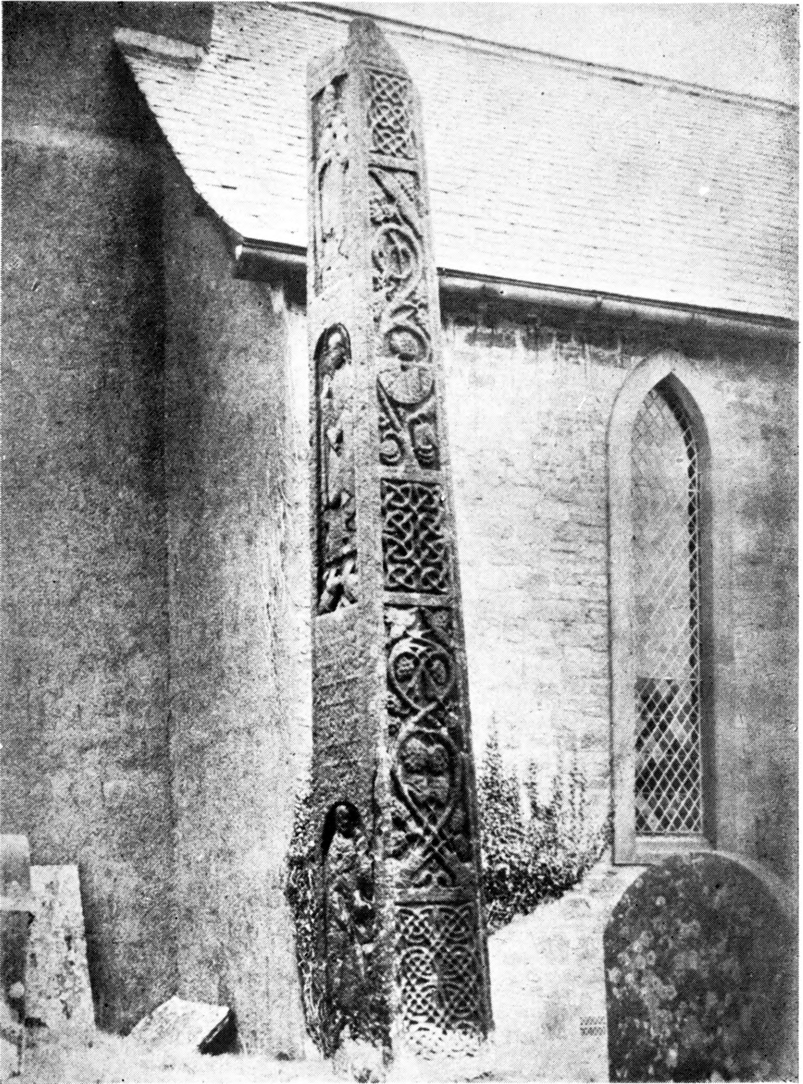
The dating of this venerable monument presents a difficult problem. The current belief is that it commemorates the conversion of Mercia by St. Chad, and this may be correct, but the cross does not appear to date from St. Chad's day, and even if it did, why should it be set up at Stapleford, at that time an unknown and nameless place which grew up in later times and which, according to one school of philologists, took its name of " Steeple-ford " from the cross or steeple itself ? We may remind ourselves that " staple " also means " market." If it were desired to commemorate St. Chad's work, contemporaries would have been much more likely to set up such a memorial to Lichfield, the then capital of Mercia.

It was during the Northumbrian supremacy in the 7th century that the anglian cross of the Bewcastle

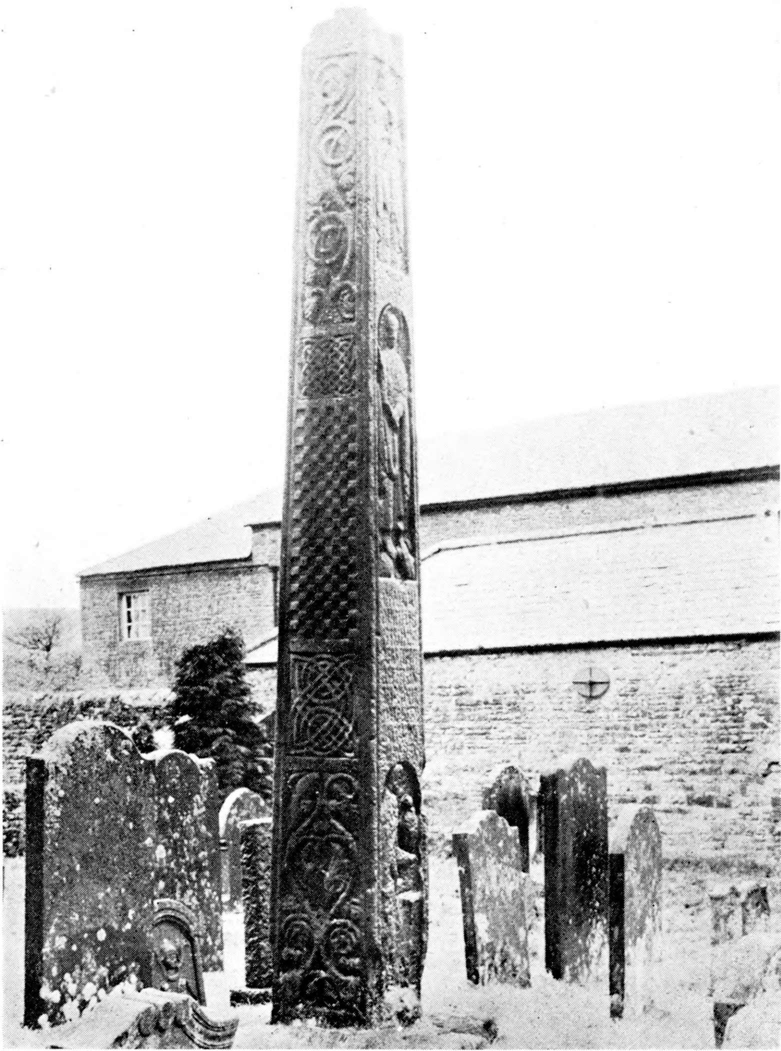
Stapleford Cross, Present South Face.



Bewcastle Cross.
Present South Face, showing the dial and East Face, showing vine scroll.



Bewcastle Cross.
Present West Face showing figure and South Face showing dial.



BEWCASTLE CROSS.
Present West Face with figure and North Face with chequer pattern.

BEWCASTLE CROSS, PRESENT WEST FACE.

Translation of the runes "This slender sign of victory set up Hwaetred Wothgaer . . . . to Alcfrith a king son of Oswy. Pray for . . . ."

See "Arts in Early Britain." Baldwin Brown. Vol. V. p246.

type was developed, and we know that the only specimen of this class of monument to be found outside the borders of Northumbria is the one at Reculver. The great enemy of Northumbria was the grand old heathen Penda, king of Mercia, who was killed in battle by Oswy in 655. Thereafter the greater part of Mercia became a province of Northumbria, and was Christianised by Diuma who became bishop in 656. In consequence of changes brought about by Archbishop Theodore, Chad was consecrated bishop of Lichfield in 669, and remained there doing valuable work till his death in 671. As Northumbria declined in power Mercia rose, and at last, under Offa, who reigned from 757 to 796, it reached the height of its influence. To mark its high status, Offa obtained permission from Pope Hadrian to raise the see of Lichfield to metropolitan rank, but this dignity was surrendered after the death of Offa in 796. When the Danes first landed in England in 787, there was bloodshed and paganism throughout the country for over two centuries in spite of the wonderful work of Alfred, his son Edward and daughter Ethelfleda, and the land had no real rest until Canute was safely seated on the throne in 1016. After Canute's conversion he did all in his power to undo the harm wrought in these heathen days. He rebuilt churches which had been destroyed, and restored Christian rites. We know that the Christian Danes were greatly impressed with the Northumbrian crosses, and tried to copy them, and we know also that the interlacing pattern is typical of their enrichment. I feel, therefore, that we may reasonably date the Stapleford cross to the reign of Canute, 1016 to 1035, though whether it replaced an older monument commemorating St. Chad or not, I am not in a position to decide.