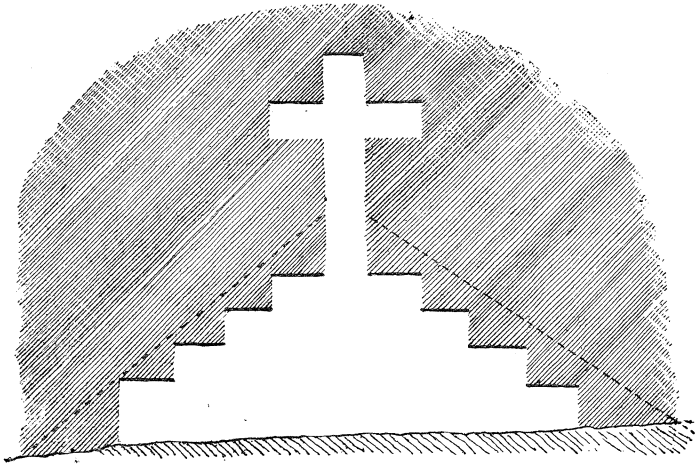


WHITECLIFF CROSS.



THE CROSS RESTORED.

[The dotted lines show the existing outline of the base or "globe."]

THE best spelling of the name is probably that adopted by Mr. Gough, who, in the map of Bucks engraved in his splendid edition of Camden (1806), gives it as "Whitcliffe Cross." One is tempted to regard the current spelling as an old compositor's error, "Whiteleaf" having been carelessly substituted for "Whitcleaf." More probably it has followed a change in pronunciation; the guttural explodent, intervening between two palatals, has been naturally dropped. An illustrated folio of the last century, full of interesting information, entitled "The Modern Universal British Traveller," has the spelling "Whitcleaf." "Cliff" often occurs as an element in place-names; in Bucks we have Radcliff and Clifton (Reynes), both on the Ouse; also Clifden in Bucks (properly "Clifton," but always locally pronounced "Clivden")

and Clifton (Hampden) in Oxfordshire, both on the Thames. These are named from apparent cleavages of hills by rivers; in the case of "Whitecliff" the cleavage is the work of a road. A "cliff" similarly formed is a conspicuous feature in the Missenden valley. Verstegan, writing in 1605, apparently speaks of "Whitclif" as a common local name; "Radclif was understood at the first for Redclif, as Whitclif for White-clif, both denoting the colour, as other like names do the fashion or situation, of their cliffs." Many minor "white cliffs," or clefts, may be seen in the "eaves,"* or edge, of the Chiltern Hills; there is a noticeable one at Great Kimble. Leland, describing the "townlet" of Wendover, says that it "standeth partly upon the north-east cliffs of Chiltern Hills."

Antiquaries are too often prone to the display of learning rather than the exercise of common sense. Hence the crazy suggestion that the name is really "Wiglaf" or "Wiglife." The latter worthy, according to an authority who shall here be nameless, was "the grandson of Woden, and father of Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon chieftains." Turning to Gibson's "Chronicon Saxonicum" (p. 13), we find that "Hengest" and "Horsa" were sons of "Wihtgilsa," the son of "Wecta," the son of Woden. All these alleged descendants of Woden are as mythical as their ancestor. Even were this otherwise, "Wihtgilsa" cannot be made, by any process of probable phonetic change, into "Whiteleaf;" nor is it easy to imagine any plausible connection between Woden's grandson and Monks' Risborough. Another wiseacre connects Whiteleaf with a Saxon "king" named "Wiglaf." In Lappenberg's "Genealogy of the Kings of Mercia," a personage of this name is casually mentioned, and the title of King of Mercia is assigned him. He does not, however, figure in the list of reigning "kings." Little or nothing appears to be known about him; and the reader might take him to be equally mythical with "Wiglife." This, however, is not the case. There certainly once was a chieftain, or "king," somewhere in West Mercia, whose

* "Hrisanbeorgan on Cilternes efese" (Saxon Charter printed in Kemble).

name is variously spelt "Wiglafus," "Wilaf," "Uitlaf," and "Uilaf." The true spelling is evidently "Wihtláf," for we find "Wihtláfesfeld" and "Wihtláfes gemæru" as the original forms of Whittlesfield and Whittlesmere (both in Worcestershire). According to Higden's "Polychronicon" (lib. v.) he died in 838, in the 13th year of his reign. Nothing justifies us in supposing that the dominions of this potent monarch ever extended so far eastward as the Chiltern hills, or that he had anything to do with the monument here investigated. One fact about Wiglaf is worth remembering. Lappenberg tells us that the name "Anglia" is first met with in one of his charters, dated on the day of St. Augustine, 833, and witnessed by Egbert of Wessex and the bishops and greater noblemen of all England (*pontifices et proceres majores totius Angliæ*). At this date the vale of Aylesbury was practically part of Wessex, and Eálmund, or Alkmund, Egbert's father, when Peter Langtoft, the "old rhyming chronicler"* erroneously calls Ailric, was in possession of the principal military positions in the neighbourhood:—

"Ailric was his father, a duke of fairé fame,
Lord of Wicombe, of Redynges, and of Tame.

To these keys of the military position we may safely add Amersham, which bears Eálmund's name to this day; in Domesday it is Elmcondesham. Agmondesham, an alternative form, is apparently based on the original alternative form Alkmund. Doubtless Eálmund drove from the Amersham valley Danish colonists from the neighbouring valley in Hertfordshire (still known as the "Danes'" Hundred), in virtue of whose settlement Coleshill in Amersham parish was reckoned part of the "Danes'" Hundred until quite recently—and secured the Amersham valley as a route to London. All these parts, at the Norman Conquest, seem to have been peopled by stout Saxons. William did not venture to approach London by Reading, Wycombe, or Amersham; he took the road through the Danes' Hundred, by way of Berkhamstead.

* Or rather his translator, Robert Manning. Peter wrote in French.

“Wiglaf,” in the circumstances, seems inadmissible as the true form of Whiteleaf; nor is it probable that the latter word is founded on any personal name whatever. The Cross is evidently named from

THE WHITE CLIFF

which it surmounts; and the lowest part of this White Cliff, abruptly rising from the high road, is obviously due to the gradual wearing down of the road itself. This road was originally a track-way leading from the village of Monks' Risborough to the downs and woodlands where the villagers, long before Julius Cæsar landed in Britain, depastured their sheep, goats, and pigs, and cut timber and brushwood for building and fuel.* By the attrition of years a long cutting was formed in the base of the steep chalk hill; this is the original “White Cliff,” and is doubtless, at least in its rudiments, nearer two than one thousand years old. The village trackway grew into something of more importance. It became a county thoroughfare; it was, in fact, in comparatively recent times the common horse and drift road from Hampden, the Missenden and Amersham valley, and the Mid-Chiltern district generally in the east, to Thame, Oxford, Woodstock, Wallingford, and Wessex generally in the west. Often must John Hampden have traversed it in his youth, riding to school at Thame and to college at Oxford. Travellers on this road cross the Icknield Way at the hamlet of Whitecliff; and this crossing, if I am right, was

THE ORIGINAL “WHITECLIFF CROSS.”

“Cross” is the usual name for such crossings. We still speak of them generically as “cross roads.” Other crossings on the Icknield Way were called “Crosses”; that in the neighbouring parish of Ellesborough is still called “Butler's Cross.” Similarly we have “Handy

* On referring to a newspaper report of the Society's meeting at Monks' Risborough, in 1864, I find it stated that the village children have long been in the habit of sliding down the cross, seated on the faggots got in the woodlands. From this practice the lower part of the cross probably acquired the name of the “globe” (an old word akin to “glib” and “glide”).

Cross" and "Potter's Cross" in the "foreigns" or parochial outskirts of Wycombe, and "Gerrard's Cross" between Beaconsfield and Uxbridge. There is another "Potter's Crouch" near St. Alban's. These names are old; "Hande Cruche" occurs in a record of the thirteenth century. "Crosses" sometimes become hamlets. Handy Cross is a rudimentary one. Butler's Cross and Whitecliff Cross are each considerable villages. The former retains its full title, now painted in capitals over the post-office; in the case of the latter the word "Cross" has been dropped, probably owing to its exclusive association with the monument on the hill-side. Some member of the Boteler family, who were lords of Aylesbury in the middle ages, probably improved the local means of communication by making a new cross road, intermediate between the old "Crosses" of Wendover and Monks' Risborough. He may, however, merely have set up a new "hand-cross"; such structures were once more substantially constructed than now. The post supporting the cross-boards, each ending in a pointing hand, was itself mounted on a base, consisting of two or more stepped stages. At or near to such crosses the local potters probably exhibited their wares for sale to passing travellers, who often carried their kitchen apparatus with them; hence the name "Potter's Cross."* "Gerrard's Cross" was doubtless made by some member of the Gerrard family, who were lords of Dorney for nearly a century (1537-1629). What, it will be said, has all this to do with

THE FIGURE-CROSS CUT IN THE CHALK,

which is so conspicuous an object from the Vale and the opposite hills? The answer is that the chalk Cross is neither more nor less than a representation of such a "hand-cross" as is above described, mounted on a base. The base is a noticeable feature. Originally it seems to have been stepped; but the angles of the turf forming the steps have been worn away, giving the base its present

* The Wycombe "Potter's Cross" is close to the hamlet of "Tyler's Green." Pottery made here was commonly hawked in the streets of Wycombe within the memory of living persons. It was carried in panniers slung across the backs of asses.

triangular shape.* The base, however, may possibly represent a simple mound of earth, such as those on which hand-crosses are occasionally erected. The intention evidently was to convey to the eyes of all within seeing distance that this hill, and no other, was the hill above the Whitecliff Cross on the Icknield Way. From a considerable distance the rounded tops of the Chilterns, which here vary little in actual elevation, are not easily distinguished. By the aid of the chalk Cross a traveller from the region of Cuddesdon and Shotover, a dozen miles distant, could ride straight for the Whitecliff Cross Road, and thus make his way to Amersham and Hertfordshire.

THE CROSS NOT A CHRISTIAN MONUMENT.

Speculative antiquaries, as might be anticipated, have connected the Cross with the local progress of Christianity. The present writer perused Mr. Williams's instructive paper on the "Origin and First Growth of Christianity in Bucks" (p. 344 of this volume), with some trepidation, anticipating the usual allusion to the Whitecliff Cross as "a monument of the conversion of the pagan Saxons to Christianity," or of an imaginary "victory of the Christian Saxons over the pagan Danes." Despite the strong temptation which this Christian symbol, cut on the spur of a lofty hill overlooking the Vale of Aylesbury, must have presented to Mr. Williams in the course of his argument, he is too good an historian to countenance any such nonsense. There is not a particle of evidence confirming these wild conjectures in the slightest degree. What, then, is the meaning of the figure-cross? To answer this question the actual age of this part of the monument must be investigated; and when this is done, we cannot help concluding that it belongs not to Saxon and Danish times, but is

OF COMPARATIVELY RECENT DATE.

There is no mention of it, so far as I know, in any old

* There can, I think, be little doubt about this. At present the cross is not of the proportions which might have been expected. The base has been gradually enlarged, and the shaft consequently shortened. Four steps, of the same width as the arms of the Cross, seem to complete the original design.

documents, chronicles, or histories. It is unknown to Leland, who rode from Thame to Aylesbury, and must have noticed it if it was in existence in the sixteenth century, and equally so to the group of antiquaries who industriously investigated English history in the time of Elizabeth and James I. Camden seems never to have heard of it; neither Spelman nor Verstegan say a word about it, though the latter enlarges upon the meaning of the name Whitecliff. But what is most decisive is the silence observed concerning it in Drayton's "Polyolbion." Drayton had a peculiar fondness for the Vale of Aylesbury and the hills of "hoary Chiltern," which are noticed at length in two different parts of the poem. Neither in the "Polyolbion" itself nor in Selden's equally learned and interesting notes is there any mention of the Cross; and when it is considered how well the Cross would have lent itself to Drayton's general plan, the conclusion that it existed not in his time is irresistible. Whether Browne Willis mentions it or not I am ignorant. Nor is this material; it was existing in his time, though it could not then be considered very ancient. The earliest mention of it that can be quoted is in a pamphlet by a certain Mr. Wise, printed in 1742, best known through the quotations of subsequent writers. Who Mr. Wise may have been I know not, nor have I read the lucubrations in which he recklessly assigned an antiquity of something like a thousand years to a monument which the most superficial inspection of authorities would have shown to have probably existed not more than a hundred. At the date of his pamphlet it had, in fact, if I am right in my inferences, existed exactly a century. What, then, is it, and what purpose was it designed to serve? The true answer seems to be that it is

A MILITARY BEACON USED IN THE CIVIL WAR
(1642-1644),

and that its purpose was to mark with unmistakable clearness, to those stationed in the vale, from Wallingford northwards, the "Whitecliff Cross" route from the vale, by way of Hampden and Missenden, to the headquarters of the Buckinghamshire Lieutenants at Amer-

sham. Probably it formed part of Hampden's general scheme of defence for the Chiltern Hills, which protected London from the King's threatened advance; and the Bledlow Cross served a similar purpose. The two roads indicated by these Crosses are "ridgeways," much less easily seized by the enemy's skirmishing parties than the lower passes of Ellesbrough and Saunderton. Two memorable attempts were made to seize the road from Oxford to London through the Chilterns, by surprising the garrison of Wycombe. The first was Lord Wentworth's well-known attack on that town, which ended in a desperate fight in the fields on its east and south sides, and the retreat of the attacking force after losing 900 men. The second was an attempt by Prince Rupert, made with the same object, in which Hampden intercepted him, and ultimately forced him to the memorable engagement of Chalgrove Field, in which the great patriot and soldier was mortally wounded. The current accounts of this engagement speak of a "Beacon Hill," on which the Parliamentary forces, already roused by the news of Rupert's sortie, were descried soon after sunrise.* This "Beacon Hill" was no doubt the hill still so denominated in the parish of Lewknor; and the Bledlow and Whitecliff Crosses perhaps belonged to a general system of beacons distinguishing each hill from the rest of the range.

THE PRESENT SHAPE OF THE CROSS

dates from about seventy years ago, when the Hampden estate passed from the family of Trevor to that of Hobart. Previously to that time, as may be seen from the descriptions in Gough's Camden (1806) and Brayley

* "His Highness Prince Rupert's late Beating up of the Rebels Quarters at Postcombe and Chinnor, and his Victory in Chalgrove Field on Sunday morning, June 18. Printed at Oxford by Leonard Lichfield, Printer to the University, 1643." . . . "The sun had risen, the alarm had spread, and a party of the Parliament's horse appeared on the side of the Beacon Hill."—LORD NUGENT'S LIFE OF HAMPDEN. The general use of such beacons for military purposes needs no illustration. There were beacons in suitable places along the roads traversing the wooded hill country: "Penn Beacon" still retains the name.

and Britton's "Beauties of England and Wales," the lower part of the shaft had widened, owing to the action of the weather, to fifty feet, or twice its proper dimensions. The upper margins of the base, marked by dotted lines in the woodcut, then had a greater spread in the upward direction, and reached nearly to the arms of the Cross; the lower part of the shaft, as it now exists, represents an imperfect restoration made in 1826. The monument is now in urgent need of repair, and many tons of chalk would be required to replace that which has been washed down the steep slope of the cliff by the rains and thaws of two centuries and a half. Should this ever be done, it would be easy to carry the shaft somewhat lower, and thus restore the Cross to its proper proportions. It may be added that the Cross is evidently connected with an ordinary fire-beacon, the earthen mound of which, on the crest of the hill close to the top of the Cross, is well known to all who visit it. Possibly the chalk Cross was first suggested by the exposure of the chalk when the sods were cut to form the beacon mound. When this beacon was lighted by kindling a bonfire on the top of the mound, the white surface of the Cross must have been vividly illuminated, thus clearly identifying to distant observers the hill on which the beacon stood. In its original state, with the stepped base, the Cross, thus lifted up, must have been a singularly striking object.

E. J. PAYNE.