

The Wantage Crosses

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UNTIL the rise of capitalism and its doctrine of *laissez faire* there stood in every market-place, raised on a calvary of steps, a tall cross to remind the traders that they were Christians, from whom was required an answer to their Master's question, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

No cross now stands in the market place at Wantage but there are still vestiges of two that once successively did so, one dating from almost the beginning, the other from the very end, of the Ages of Faith.

On the window-sill in the south porch of the Church is a fragment of sculptured stone carved with a pattern of interlaced strap-work which is the characteristic ornament of the Anglo-Saxon period. It formed part of the shaft of such a cross as may still be seen not far away in the Church of Ramsbury; similar, but larger, fragments remain at Cricklade, Colerne, Minety, Bibury and, Mr. Collingwood says, Sonning (*Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age*, p. 183). Part of the head of a cross of this type was lately found among the rubble in the wall of the car park of the Abingdon Cinema (*Berks. Arch. Journal*, Vol. 39, p. 58). Some of these may have been churchyard crosses, but most of them must belong to a period when the cross alone represented Christianity in most villages.

Though our fragment is but a small one it is the only vestige remaining of Anglo-Saxon Wantage and the sole visible link with the age of the town's most illustrious son. It may even be a part of the cross which tradition says he set up on the market square of his birthplace. Such a relic should find some better resting place than the window-sill of a porch.

The second fragment is even less respectfully treated. It stands on the steps leading up to the front door of what was formerly Winslow House and is now St. Gabriel's, an annexe to

St. Mary's School, belonging to the Wantage Sisterhood. It evidently formed the head of a cross, and consists of a large octagonal block with a domical capping, its faces having niched figures, much weathered, but apparently representing Saints. A correspondent in the *Quarterly Journal of the Berks. Archaeological and Architectural Society* in 1893 (Vol. iii, p. 60) says that many of them could then be recognised "by their badges, as St. Peter with his keys, etc."

The style of the work is what the Victorian antiquaries called "debased Gothic," a mixture of mediæval and Renaissance details, which dates it unmistakeably to the late Tudor period. It corresponds pretty closely with the description and illustration in a letter printed in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of Feb. 1796. The writer, signing himself J. Stone, and dating from Letcombe Regis 8 Jan. 1796, explains that his drawing "is the top stone of the old Market-Cross at Wantage; but it has not been standing for upwards of a century. It appears to be very ancient, though the date is uncertain: the townsmen have a tradition among them that it was erected by King Alfred, who was born there. It is octagonal and is adorned all round with figures of Saints and apostles in *alto relievo*; it was lately presented to me by the town and is at present erected on a mount in my garden." Of the three figures visible on the side represented in the sketch, two bear crosses and one a large key. How, and when, the stone came back to Wantage, remains to be discovered.

From Lysons' account (*Berks.*, p. 408) we might suppose that the Wantage Cross was standing in 1806, until we discover from a footnote that the authors are merely quoting Symonds' MSS c. 1644 "Round the old Market Cross is the following inscription: Pray for the good Earl of Bath and for good Master William Barnabe the builder hereof 1580 and for William Lord Fitzwarren."

The Complete Peerage (Vol. ii, p. 16) elucidates these references. The "good Earl of Bath" was John Bouchier, 2nd Earl of Bath of that family, descended from the Fitzwarin lords of Wantage. His son died in his father's life-time, 1556; and his widow next year married the Earl's land-steward, William Barnaby, to the

great indignation of the family. She died, once more a widow, in 1586, so that Barnaby's gift of the Market Cross to Wantage in 1580 must have been the act of his last years.

The imprecation is somewhat puzzling; the good earl had been dead for twenty years, and William Lord Fitzwarin, his grandson, was now, and for twenty years had been, Earl of Bath. Perhaps Symonds repeated "William" when he should have written "John," for that Lord Fitzwarin who was William Barnaby's stepson. Even so, a public appeal for prayers for the dead at so late a date leaves one wondering.

But that a relic of such interest as this piece of sculpture should be left to moulder in a private garden makes one wonder more—particularly since the present owners of St. Gabriel's share the view of all lovers of local antiquities, that it should be preserved in some more appropriate place.

Dimensions: diameter of A.S. cross-shaft 11"

length of fragment 14"

height of head of Burnaby's cross 21"

width 12"

length of arms 7" (the arms, one now detached,

do not appear in Stone's sketch, and seem to be fragments squared up and morticed into their present position at a later date, perhaps when the cross-head was set upon its modern pedestal).