

YCCART 2024/Y9

Litton churchyard cross

**YATTON, CONGRESBURY, CLAVERHAM AND CLEEVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL
RESEARCH TEAM (YCCART)**

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Litton churchyard cross March 1994 (*scale 2 x 50cm*)

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Abstract

Litton churchyard cross remnant (constantly wrongly identified as a 'font') is one of approximately 200 cross remnants surviving in pre-1974 Somerset. While a sadly hugely depleted database, enough physical remains of the old stone crosses survive to give some small idea of the huge landscape importance to the medieval Christian mind (and there were few others) of crosses, churchyard, village, wayside or others.

Acknowledgements

The study of stone crosses in Somerset began in its organised form with the publication in 1877 of 'Old Stone Crosses of Somerset' by Dr Charles Pooley of Weston-super-Mare. The study as a whole owes a huge debt to Dr Pooley, who also published on the Old Stone Crosses of Gloucestershire (1868). Ironically, Litton was one of the few crosses in Somerset that escaped his attention, although it had been previously recorded by John Buckler in 1834 (Somerset Archaeological Society Collections in Somerset Heritage Centre) - see Fig 3 below.

Introduction

Yatton, Congresbury, Claverham and Cleeve Archaeological Research Team (YCCART) is a Community Archaeology team working across northern Somerset.

Our objective is to undertake archaeological fieldwork to enable a better understanding and management of the heritage of the area while recording and publishing the activities and locations of the research carried out.

Site location



Fig 1: Location general

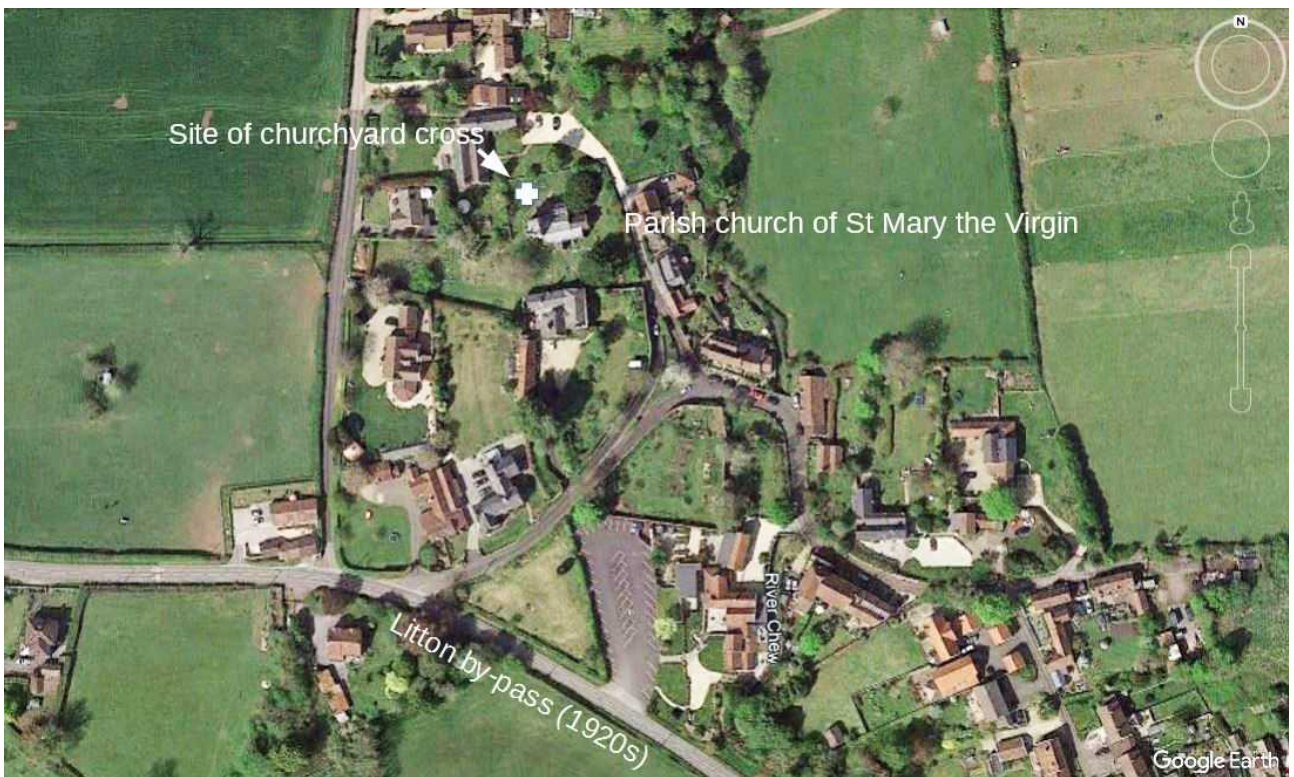


Fig 2: Location specific

The churchyard at Litton lies at ST59385470, in the northern edge of the village of Litton, on a slight hill next to the river Chew, and some 1.5km almost due north of the larger village of Chewton Mendip, (formerly in Mendip District; currently in Somerset Council). The site lies on the northern flank of Mendip; communications are largely to and from the B3114 along the foot of that flank.

Land use and geology

Litton church sits on a local knoll of Portishead Beds sandstone above the river.

The site lies within an open churchyard, with complete public access.

History and archaeology (general)

Medieval stone crosses were a fashionable subject of antiquarian enquiry from the mid 19th century, when Pooley was studying those of Gloucestershire (Pooley 1868) and Somerset (Pooley 1877). Some of the latest work on a whole county was that of Watkins on the crosses of Herefordshire (Watkins 1930). Sequences of reports on other counties have been published, but few crosses have recently been examined using modern archaeological techniques.

Some of the larger and more 'romantick' (i.e. ruinous) were recorded from the late 18th century by antiquarians, and it is by their fortunate attention to the structures that we know of the appearance of (say) Taunton, Axbridge or Bridgwater market crosses, but illustrations of churchyard and other crosses were much rarer.

Litton churchyard cross has received very little academic attention.

The lack of recent academic study of these structures means that most of the ideas surrounding their construction and use (such as the strange persistence of belief in their being earlier than the church which they serve, which they almost never are) are 19th century in origin, and reflect the academic standards and ideas of that period.

The 'Old Stone Crosses of Somerset' was written and published in the late 19th century (officially in 1877, although his research seems to have been carried out during the previous decade) by Dr Charles Pooley.

Pooley was a doctor at the Weston Sanatorium (now the 'Royal Sands' on Weston-super-Mare sea front) and lived in Raglan Crescent in Weston. He spent much of the 1860s and '70s travelling the lanes and byways of Somerset seeking out these fascinating monuments in churchyards, by waysides, in village centres, on parish or manorial boundaries, over springs: he chatted with the local vicars and rectors, many of whom studied antiquities in their often remote parishes, where often they might be the only well-educated person in the place.

His documentary study seems, by today's standards, very slight, although to be fair his book was never intended as anything but 'notes', and he did achieve his plan, which was to make people far more aware of these structures, and to make certain they were better conserved, and in this, he largely succeeded.

Pooley retired to Cheltenham not long after the publication of his book, and a saddening letter now bound into the copy of the Old Stone Crosses in Nailsea library reveals that at the end of his life, he was completely blind.

The name 'stone cross' covers a multitude of sins (if you'll pardon the phrase): it can mean anything from a crude cross cut into a natural boulder (there is one on the border of the parishes of Culbone and Porlock, in far Exmoor) to a large complex building erected for a market shelter (such as that in the market place at Cheddar).

The medieval form of cross, which broadly speaking consists of a set of steps, a socket and a shaft (all broadly, but not strictly, radially symmetric), supporting and displaying a small carved head with crucifixion and other scenes, is universal throughout the surviving Somerset crosses (with the exception of the special category of market crosses, which also incorporate a shelter over the steps - still radially symmetric, however).

The heads usually depicted a crucifixion scene on one side, and a second scene, often of the BVM holding the child Christ, on the other. The more ornate often also included figures on each side of the head as well, often figures of a knight and / or bishop.

Because of the religious symbolism of the carved heads, these were ruthlessly destroyed in the iconoclastic times of the Reformation and 17th century civil war. This was carried out so thoroughly that only four survive on their shafts in Somerset – Stringston and Spaxton near Bridgwater, Wedmore and Chewton Mendip. Pooley identified several heads or fragments of heads surviving elsewhere, and my research has raised this total to about 20.

Churchyard crosses are built for complex, inter-related reasons, but briefly, these seem to be

- 1 As a common memorial to all the dead of the churchyard
- 2 As a gathering point for the spreading of news and proclamations
- 3 As the last site of common celebration on the procession around the parish on Palm Sunday (Russett, in prep).

The crosses in churchyards are certainly always connected in the public mind with preaching: at Craswell and Llanveynoe in Herefordshire, Watkins (1930) recorded seats constructed outside the church, apparently for the use of congregations listening to preaching at crosses. Such seats exist at Spaxton and Glastonbury. This seems to have been unusual, and presumably other congregations stood (or maybe just sat on the grass). This was clearly the case with other crosses, such as that in Iron Acton churchyard in South Gloucestershire, where a small railed space is provided for the accommodation of the preacher.

One main function of the churchyard cross, however, seems to have been as the final station on the Palm Sunday procession before re-entering the church (see Watkins 1930, for a discussion of this). The result of such use is that many of the crosses have (and others presumably once had) affixes or drill holes or other features facing the church path, and which would have been used to hold decorations and possibly the pyx on Palm Sunday. Such a use is remembered in the name Yew Cross at Wookey. Unfortunately, since that cross was 'restored' in 1905 (Brass tablet in Wookey church) the socket is the only pre-20th century stone surviving. This also implies that the cross was very likely to have originally been sited beside the path to the church door in use in the medieval period, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the south door. Fieldwork indicates that it is almost always sited (when in its original position) to the right of the path as the door is approached. This may imply that churchyard crosses not in this position have been moved at some time - this is certainly the case with Orchard Portman, where contemporary

drawings during the 1840s document the move. In other cases, the path may have moved away from the cross, although this seems to be less likely to happen often.

Village crosses ('market crosses') are rather more simple to understand, largely being central to trade and exchange (both of goods, and of information and news) in the village.

Many crosses acting as market crosses have an interesting relationship to their market place, and to events there. Both sheltered and open crosses are frequently seen as sites for the sale of small produce, or where stalls can be erected. Frequently, and especially just beyond living memory, they were perceived as the appropriate place for market women to sit, (as opposed to the men who walked around the market trading livestock) and the frequency of the occurrence of the name 'Butter Cross' (supplemented by several occasions where name and records imply the existence of a cheese market) imply that the market function of crosses may have been seen as a domestic / female / enclosed role, as opposed to the agricultural / male / open role of the rest of the market. This is a large subject, and one that might be investigated further. In this context, it is interesting to see a letter of Sir Edward Hext of Low Ham to Ralph Rixdon, vicar of Kingsdon, in 1615, concerning Somerton market cross, and which includes the lines:

'...but also will (at myne owne Chardge) build a fayre Crosse, that the people maye sytt drye to sell their butter, Cheese, Appells, oatemeale, Cabbage, rootes and other such thinges, as are solde at a Crosse...' (Berry 1992: 110)

Time and again, the relationship of village crosses, High Crosses and crosses in suburbs of towns like Wells to markets is unmistakable (examples can be found in Wells, Frome, or Taunton). Presumably, the erection of a market cross would be part of the equipping of a market place, as would the erection of shambles, or allocation of places for stalls.

During the period of the Reformation, a practice known as 'Creeping to the cross' was at first supported by King Henry VIII in 1539, then in 1546, Archbishop Cranmer drafted an edict (which the King never signed) for the banning of the practice along with other major religious festivals. After Lord Protector Somerset's edict for the destruction of all shrines and pictures of saints in July 1547, the blessing of foliage on Palm Sunday and 'Creeping to the Cross' were both banned in February 1548.

The 1643 'Ordinance for the utter demolishing, removing and taking away of all Monuments of Superstition or Idolatry' marked the beginning of a systematic attack on the remaining crosses that had survived the Reformation (<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/acts-ordinances-interregnum/pp425-426>) (recovered 13 January 2017).

Some public resistance to these two periods of destruction can be seen in the hiding of cross heads in the fabric of churches, where they have subsequently been found during works to the churches (as at Berrow and Tellisford, for example).

A few crosses, of course, have been moved into churchyards to protect them from destruction (such as Bishops Lydeard): others have made the opposite journey (Evercreech, for example), while some have dodged about the village (such as Meare),

and in these cases, their original function cannot be readily assumed. Further discussion of origins and meanings of crosses are in (Russett *in prep*).

Historical & archaeological context (detailed)

Litton is a small village on the river Chew. The church and associated yard lies above the rest of the village, which was *Hlytton* c1050 (Wells Hist MSS) and *Litune* (DB 1086), both probably meaning 'settlement by the *hlyde* (noisy river)'. Alternatively, one spelling, *Lictona* 1182-5 (Farrer 1914), if it applies to the Somerset Litton, may be from OE *lictun* - 'burial ground'.

Unusually, Litton churchyard cross does not feature in Charles Pooley's otherwise inclusive 'Old Stone Crosses of Somerset' (Pooley 1877), although the professional architect and illustrator John Buckler did draw the structure in 1834 (Fig 3 below): the drawing survives in the Somerset Archaeological Society collections in the Somerset Heritage Centre.

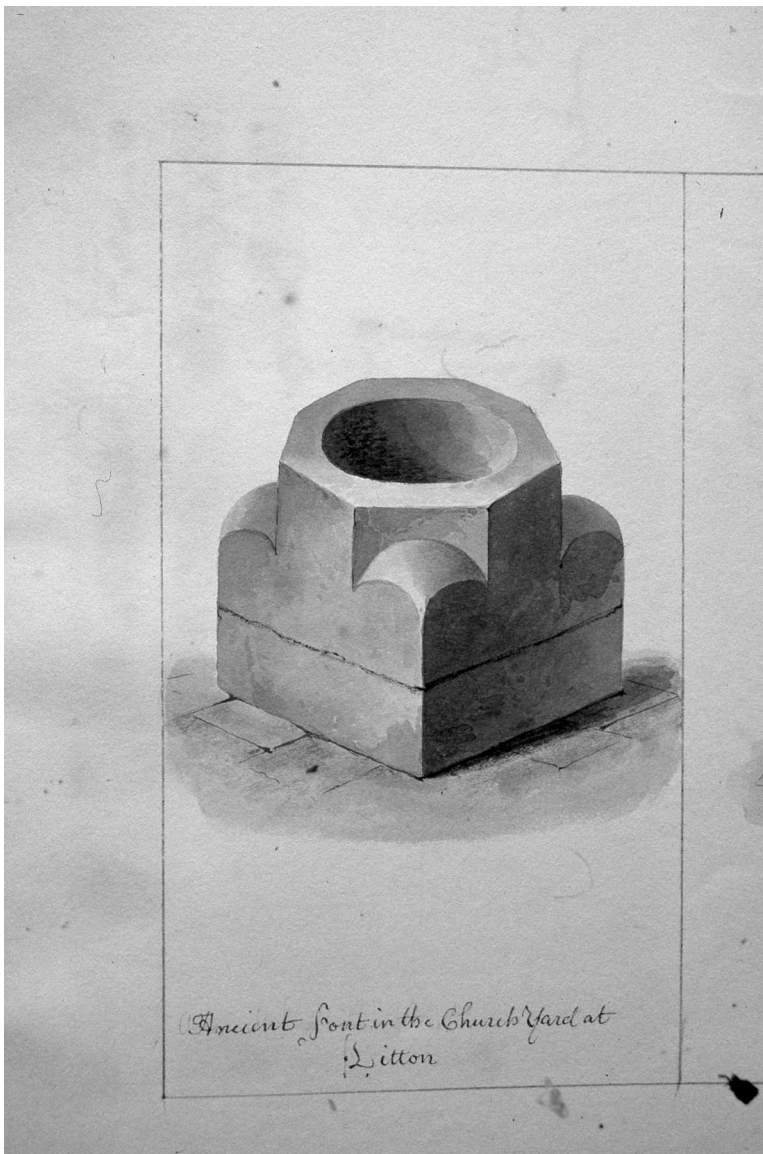


Fig 3: Drawing by John Buckler (1834) of 'Ancient font' in Litton churchyard

This initial misidentification of the cross-socket as a 'font' is understandable given the academic understanding of crosses in the 1830s: perhaps less excusable is the repetition of this down almost to the present.

While reproducing the major details of the structure, Buckler's drawing is a product of its time, and does not attempt to display the dilapidated state of the cross, although the total absence of mortar in the current structure suggests it was already in a parlous state this early, not very surprising in a monument that had probably not benefited from any management for at least three centuries at that point.

The earliest known photograph is in the Somerset Heritage Centre, by the Devon antiquary 'CND' (name withheld by SHC) in c1960 (Fig 4) (SHC DD\X\CND\2\1\109).

Subsequently the earliest photograph appears to be one in the Somerset HER from 1985, and then mine from 1994 (Fig 5 and cover).

The cross is of typical square to octagon type, much worn, and 0.82m square, although this includes expansion due to cracking. It is c 0.60m high. The hole in the socket is no less than 0.64m across, leaving a 0.09m thick surround. It has presumably been hollowed out at some time to act as a trough or bowl (Fig 4 below), something that has happened to other cross sockets (such as one at Tickenham in North Somerset).

The lower part of the stone is frost shattered and may not be original. The socket rests upon a dry stone built base (1.06m square by 0.42m high), and itself is in about 30 - 40 pieces, cracked both vertically and horizontally, and mainly held together by ivy. The cross is at the south-east angle of the church, about 15m from the tower (seen in 1994) (Fig 5 below).

It is not clear if this was its original site in the churchyard: given the general information available about crosses (see above), it seems unlikely, especially its siting on the ritual and actual north side of the church, away from the approach to the south door entrance.



Fig 4: CND's photograph of c1960

The cross has been included in the List of Buildings of Historic and Architectural Interest at Grade II (see Appendix).

Historic England's description clearly states that the Listing is for 'historical importance' reasons, but nevertheless this is clear demonstration of such.

Extra importance is also given by its inclusion in the 'curtilage' (area dedicated for the enjoyment of a Listed Structure) of St Mary's church, a Grade I Listed building (one of the top 4% in the country).

When visited in 2024, the cross was heavily overgrown, unfortunately lying outside of the



Fig 5: Litton churchyard cross and church 1994

maintained area.

Without some clearance, it is impossible to identify the geological make up of the cross, although cross-sockets in the northern Somerset area (and especially those related to Wells, as Litton clearly is) were often constructed of freestone from Doulling, sometimes even constructed in the masons' yard at Wells cathedral.

Methodology

The report was written in Libre Office 5 Writer.

Photographs were taken by members of YCCART, and remain the copyright of YCCART.

Recommendations for further work

It is recommended that the cross be cleared of undrgrowth, so this historically mportant part if the suite of structures in Litton parish churchyard can be enjoyed by the parishioners. Further work in maintenance and /or conservation repairs would depend on availability of funds and other matters (not least, its Listed status).

References

Berry, S. 1992	<i>Somerton Cross Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries</i> 33: 110
Farrer 1914	<i>Early Yorkshire charters</i> , Yorkshire Archaeological Society
Pooley, C. 1868	<i>Notes on the Old Crosses of Gloucestershire</i> London
Pooley, C. 1877	<i>The Old Stone Crosses of Somerset</i> London
Russett, V in prep	<i>The Old Stone Crosses of Somerset</i>
Watkins, A. 1930	<i>The Old Standing crosses of Herefordshire</i> Hereford

Authors

Vince Russett

Date

2024-08-14

Appendix 1: Official Historic England Listing (downloaded 2024-08-14)

Official list entry

Heritage Category: Listed Building

Grade: II

List Entry Number: 1307320

Date first listed: 29-Jan-1987

List Entry Name:

REMAINS OF CHURCHYARD CROSS IN CHURCHYARD ABOUT 15 METRES NORTH OF TOWER CHURCH OF ST MARY

Statutory Address 1:

REMAINS OF CHURCHYARD CROSS IN CHURCHYARD ABOUT 15 METRES NORTH OF TOWER CHURCH OF ST MARY

Location Statutory Address:

REMAINS OF CHURCHYARD CROSS IN CHURCHYARD ABOUT 15 METRES NORTH OF TOWER CHURCH OF ST MARY

The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

District: Somerset (Unitary Authority)

Parish: Litton

National Grid Reference: ST 59373 54714

Details

ST55SE LITTON CP LITTON VILLAGE

7/65 Remains of churchyard Cross, in churchyard, about 15 m north of tower, Church of St Mary GV II

Remains of churchyard cross. Probably C15, later alteration. Low square rubble base rough hewn block set over; and set over all the octagonal socket of the former cross, broad convex broach to each alternating sides, centre hewn out to form a bowl. Much damaged and altered; primarily included for historical interest; remainder of cross missing.

Listing NGR: ST5937354714

Legacy

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System number: 268084

Legacy System: LBS

Legal

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.