

# **ST BRIDGET'S CHURCH, BRIGHAM**

## **ANGLO-SAXON/ANGLO-SCANDINAVIAN (VIKING) CROSSES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Among the collection of stonework from various periods assembled in the south aisle of St Bridget's Church are 13 pieces of Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-Scandinavian (Viking) Crosses dating mostly from the tenth or early eleventh centuries. At first sight they cannot easily be identified or their purposes understood. All too easily they can be dismissed as a random collection of broken artefacts of little significance. But when their origins and history are known, they take on their true personality as ancient relics of skilled craftsmanship in the service of Christian worship - at a dramatic stage in the conversion of North-West England from paganism.

These notes aim to supply sufficient basic information to enable visitors to appreciate their true significance.

### **THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CROSSES**

Most crosses stood between 36 inches/91 centimetres and 240 inches/609 centimetres tall, varying in shape, size and type of decoration. They comprised a distinctive crosshead, supported by a cross-shaft, and, additionally with some of the larger examples, all supported by a cross-base. Both wooden and stone crosses were raised and acted as focal points for Christian worship, as places of prayer and contemplation - often within a monastic setting - as memorials to the dead in what we would now describe as a graveyard; significant places in the life of saints or their funeral routes; or as boundary or well-markers. Historically, these crosses might be replaced or augmented by a church, as the new religion took hold.

Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-Scandinavian crossheads were identified as either "free-arm" (a standard Latin cross with a horizontal line placed across a vertical line), or "ring-head" (where the four arms of a free-arm cross are linked by curved sections - known as "quadrants" - to give the overall appearance of a ring. (These are often referred to as "wheel-head" crossheads.) Both descriptors have a number of variants, one of which, a "hammer-head crosshead", is among the stones in St Bridget's. Hammer-head crossheads are free-arm crossheads with two additional horizontal arms extending from each side of the top vertical arm, giving the appearance of a "hammer-head". The two additional top horizontal arms can differ in height and width from the other arms; the crosshead appears top heavy.

The cross-shafts themselves are either angular or circular; some variants have a round lower part and an upper angular part. Angular cross-shafts usually have two opposite "faces" wider than the two other narrower sides. Cross-shafts may taper from bottom to top or be straight-sided. The shafts of some crosses were placed straight into the ground, whilst others, the more substantial in dimension, were placed into cross-bases to provide stability. Cross-bases vary in shape and size and some are stepped.

Some crossheads and cross-shafts may be cut from a single piece of stone. In others, the cross-head is joined to the cross-shaft by mortise and tenon jointing or by lead filled iron rods inserted in dowel holes to join up crosshead and cross-shaft. Some of the larger cross-shafts may be formed from a number of sections of stonework which may also be joined together by mortise and tenon or iron rods and dowels. Where provided, cross-bases have a central socket for the insertion of the cross-shaft.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF DECORATION**

The crossheads, cross-shafts and cross-bases were often decorated with abstract designs but many have figurative designs including "scenes" of both religious and secular nature. The stonework was originally brightly painted in garish colours.

Anglo-Saxon decoration in the late eighth and early ninth centuries was characterised by complex and intricate designs which were symmetrical, well-proportioned and balanced. From the mid tenth century onwards designs tended to involve less difficult patterns with figures less well drawn. A renaissance in the late tenth century and early eleventh century approached earlier standards. Abstract designs often involve:

- (i) "moulding" - a continuous section of stonework with defined parallel surface border edges.  
Variations include:

- a. flat moulding - which is squared-off in cross section.
  - b. roll moulding - with a three-quarter circle in cross section.
  - c. cable-pattern moulding - a series of distinctive thick diagonal lines in relief which take on a distended curved shape.
- (ii) “interlace” - a pattern of ribbon-like strands intricately entwined and woven together constantly passing over and under each other.  
Variations include:
- a. knot-work - the ribbon-like strands tend to be wider and more angular than some interlace designs.
  - b. plait-work - all ribbon-like strands advance towards the base of the design without changing direction or turning back on themselves.
  - c. ring-chain - the pattern contains inner and outer pairs of concentric circles entwined with singular or pairs of distinctly longer, curving or angular and diagonally-placed, ribbon-like strands connecting them to similar concentric circles.
- (iii) “scroll design” - a pattern of ribbon-like strands resembling a roll of paper, or a circuitous design.
- (iv) “plant-scroll design” - a circuitous design representing the branches or trunks of a plant, bush, vine, or tree with distinctive and variously styled leaves and buds, often with trailing or climbing vines laden with fruit.

Parts of these crosses were sometimes later used for building purposes and may one day be identified as in-filling for walling. Possibly Anglo-Saxon fabric survives in the lower stages of the tower but there are no distinctive features which could substantiate this.

### **WHAT IS DISPLAYED?**

As indicated in the numbers adjacent to each individual piece of stonework, from east (left) to west (right), with definitions provided in the paragraphs above there are:

1. Part of a damaged angular cross-shaft decorated with flat moulding and interlace design.
2. Two sections of stonework from the same late eighth century Anglo-Saxon angular cross-shaft, placed one behind the other; both are decorated with flat moulding and a plant-scroll design with vestiges of leaves and a berry.
3. & 4.  
Most of the central section and the attached horizontal arms of a hammer-head crosshead decorated with indications of roll moulding along the borders of the arms and surrounding a protruding central boss with a hole in its centre. It has been separated and placed next to the left of what survives of its upper vertical arm, which is decorated with a free-arm cross incised in its centre and part of a band of flat moulding.
5. Part of an arm from a free-arm crosshead with both faces decorated with roll moulding and interlace design. The two other sides are decorated with roll moulding and plait-work design.
6. Part of an arm from a free-arm crosshead decorated with roll moulding and interlace design; the north side is the most clearly decorated.
7. A fragment whose purpose is now difficult to determine decorated with interlace design.

8. Part of an angular cross-shaft decorated on the north face with interlace design including an incomplete and indistinct ensnared animal - the centre of its eye is 7½ inches/19 centimetres up from the base. The west side is decorated with flat moulding and plant-scroll design including a single pellet (rounded or elongated shape in relief).
  
9. Part of an angular cross-shaft which has been placed upside down. Both the faces are decorated with roll moulding and ring-chain design; the north face additionally has plait-work design. The west side is decorated with roll moulding and plait-work design. The east side is decorated with roll moulding and knot-work design.
  
10. Most of a free-arm crosshead, the lower vertical arm is missing and the upper vertical arm is incomplete. The north face is decorated with a roll moulding along the borders. This encloses the upper body, arms and most of the head (with a scroll design suggesting curly hair) of a human figure in portrait; there is also some interlace design. The eyes and nose are distinctive. The right hand (on the left-hand side) grasps what may be a snake whose body surrounds its stomach; the left hand (on the right-hand side) has the palm open. The south face is decorated with indications of roll moulding along the borders of the arms. In the centre is a large pellet-like boss surrounded by six similarly-sized bosses all surrounded by roll moulding in relief. The horizontal arms are decorated with interlace design and the upper vertical arm has in the centre a human head in portrait. The ends of the horizontal arms are decorated with roll moulding and knot-work design.
  
11. Most of a ring-head crosshead; one of the arms with its attached quadrants of the “ring” on each side are missing. The north face is decorated with roll moulding and interlace design and a protruding boss in the centre surrounded by roll moulding in relief. The south face is decorated with flat moulding and a circular incised groove in the centre. None of the quadrants of the ring is decorated.
  
12. Part of a hogback grave cover decorated with a scroll design on the wall with tegulations (a series of overlapping tiles similar to roofing tiles) arranged in two rows on what survives of the pitched roof above. The west gable end is decorated with roll moulding forming a triangular shape.

Hogback grave covers or hogback tombstones were recumbent grave covers in the shape of an elongated house with a convex profile comprising a pitched roof above long side walls; often the roof had a top curved ridge. The overall effect is reminiscent in shape of a hog's back. Many, but not all, have inward-facing stylised bear-like animals at each gable end gnawing at the top ridge and roof. They hold the sloping roof and long side walls of the house with their paws. Other examples, instead of the bear-like animals, have representations of an inward facing serpent or animal head on the top ridge only. Other examples have gabled, inwardly-sloping end panels decorated with a Crucifixion Scene, animals or an abstract design.

13. Two sections of stonework from the same cross-base have been placed side by side on the floor. It is likely that this provided the supporting base for a preaching cross. Each has a distinctive band of roll moulding surrounding the central hole for the socket into which the cross-shaft was inserted.
  - a. The stonework on the right-hand side is decorated on the top with cable-pattern moulding and scroll design including, in profile to the right, an animal's head with distinctive eye and

open jaws - these are between 6 inches/15 centimetres and 7 inches/17 centimetres from the northeast corner of the stonework. The top of the animal head is adjacent to, but separate from, the cable-pattern moulding forming the left-hand border of the stonework. The head is at right-angles to the decoration on the right from which its body emerges. Its open jaws bite onto a loose tail - the break between the two pieces of stonework makes the object between the open jaws less easy to identify as a tail.

The north side of the stonework is decorated with cable-pattern moulding and an interlace design from which emerges in the top left-hand corner the large head of an animal in profile to the left. Part of its round head and long upper jaw are parallel to moulding providing the left-hand border. Its round eye (2½ inches/6 centimetres down from the top and 5 inches/12 centimetres from the left edge), curling jaw line, with its open jaw with a longer upper jaw and shorter lower jaw, are distinctive; there is a gap in the design between the end of the jaws and the bottom left-hand corner. The east side is decorated with cable-pattern moulding and interlace design.

- b. The stonework on the left-hand side is decorated on the top with cable-pattern moulding and scroll design. The north side is decorated with vestiges of cable-pattern moulding and a confusing design which includes the headless large body of a crouching animal in profile to the left whose rear sits on top of a large curving triangular-shaped back leg with grooves indicating its toes; its curled tail is in the top right-hand (west) corner. The west side is decorated with cable-pattern moulding and vestiges of interlace design. From the interlace design the body of an animal in profile to the left can be identified. Its neck terminates in a head near the lower left-hand corner; its stubby upper jaw and smaller lower jaw, eye and the triangular shape formed by its forehead and the top of its head are distinctive. It also has two large and distinctive angled fore-legs with hooves, one almost on top of its head and the other near its lower jaw. Although the rear of its body is incomplete a good part of its long curl-ended tail can be identified in the interlace design in the lower right-hand corner.

### **WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE STONEWORK IN ST BRIDGET'S?**

The Anglo-Saxon/Anglo-Scandinavian (Viking) crosses in St Bridget's Church provide a very good exemplar range of the diversity of the stonework that survives. There are almost complete examples of free-arm and ring-head crossheads; a less complete hammer-head crosshead; and examples of sections from angular cross-shafts. In addition it has an almost complete cross-base. The decoration on all this stonework is for the most part clear and easy to identify; the interlace, plait-work, ring-chain, knot-work in particular. In addition it has a free-arm crosshead with a human representation rarely seen on any other crosses. The two sections of the cross-base provide a good example of where both the top and sides are decorated with distinctive animals.

The diversity, quality and unusual decoration on some of this stonework has led me to include St Bridget's Church, Brigham among the countrywide 126 "Recommended Exemplar Sites" in my forthcoming book "An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon Church Architecture & Anglo-Saxon & Anglo-Scandinavian Stone Sculpture" which I hope to publish in 2015.

In preparation for 2015 is "A Gazetteer of Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Scandinavian & Hiberno-Norse Sites: Cumbria, Dumfriesshire & Wigtownshire" which covers 65 "sites" in these counties including St Bridget' Church, Brigham.

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