

The Stancombe or Lypiatt Cross

Lately there have been suggestions that the Stancombe or Lypiatt Cross, one of the oldest monuments in Gloucestershire, should be moved to somewhere more visible and accessible than its present home by the Stroud road, about halfway between Stancombe crossroads and Lypiatt Park. Travellers cannot find it, weeds threaten to overwhelm it, and as it weathers year by year the ancient pictorial carvings become harder to make out.

How important is it?

There are three theories. County archaeologists today regard it as an Anglo-Saxon preaching cross. An earlier generation identified it as a boundary marker. And if the carvings are religious icons, it may have been moved here from a Saxon abbey. Whatever its purpose, the Cross is unique in Gloucestershire, and one of very few of its kind surviving anywhere in England. Hence its listing by English Heritage as a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

How old is it?

By comparison with similar monuments, particularly the Bewcastle Cross in Northumbria, and from its decoration, experts place it in the late eighth century, around 780 A.D. It probably pre-dates Bisley's earliest church. Because of its Christian iconography the now headless Cross may have been damaged at the time of the reformation. It is assumed the top was a Christian Cross.

What did it look like originally?

The surviving square tapered shaft, more than one and a half metres high, was cut from a single block of local limestone. The missing head probably made a total height of about two metres. The shaft stands on a double base, held in place by a projection into a circular hole. Lichens and moss now add to its antiquity. When the Cross was examined in 1929 drawings were made of possible much-worn figures in niches on three of the four faces. Above the figure on the south face are partly obscured letters, interpreted as B.P., perhaps standing for Bisley Parish. These seem to have been cut into the stone long after its first construction.

Who were the figures on the stone?

The west side figure, facing the road, appears to be wearing long robes: perhaps a Biblical, saintly or monastic person, arms raised in blessing. The two lines of pegholes are a mystery. On the south face nothing now is recognisable, not even the letters B and P. The east side shows apparently two figures, one above the other, and this may have been so on all faces. On the north side the head of the figure has been cut away, perhaps to make room for another head. All these are generally regarded as religious motifs; one may represent a patron or benefactor who commissioned the Cross. But all this is conjectural, and the carvings are now almost too worn to be decipherable.

What was the original location?

Here again there are several theories. St Clair Baddeley, the noted archaeologist from Painswick who recorded and restored the Cross in 1929, believed that it had stood originally at the Stancombe Ash crossroads, basing this on an 18th century map. The caption which stands in front of the Cross today was devised by Baddeley. There is documentary evidence that Stancomb(e) was the meeting

place of the Bisley Hundred, where the local Witanagemot or Anglo-Saxon village council met. And the 1928 Ordnance Survey map of this area records Witantree Farm just north of Stancombe; but cross may refer merely to crossroads.

Mary Rudd, who published her comprehensive history of Bisley in 1937, was convinced the Cross had always stood where it now does, marking the boundary between Bisley and Lypiatt parishes. (The boundary follows the Lypiatt valley.) This idea was supported by a faint suggestion of the letters O.L., standing for Over Lypiatt, in photographs taken by Baddeley. In a 1924 document it was called 'the Lord's Stone.' Again ambiguity: the Lord meaning God, or lord of the manor?

What should be done?

All the experts advise against trying to clean the monument, but suggest some removal of the moss growing on it. English Heritage say that specialist photography might produce enhanced images of the carvings, which could then be displayed.

Whether it is historically accurate or not, the existing location is clearly unsatisfactory in terms of visibility, maintenance and weed overgrowth. Even tourists on the lookout for the Cross are liable to drive straight by. Those who would like to see the Cross moved to Stancombe Ash feel it would be better looked after there, and more accessible to visitors. There has been a suggestion that the Cross should be moved to Bisley Church, but there are many objections to this.

The Triangle would seem appropriate in many ways, not least because it marks the junction of ancient trackways from Stroud to Birdlip and Painswick to Cirencester.

Who would pay for all this?

There is a strong possibility that grants could be obtained from various sources, such as the heritage lottery fund, to meet the cost of removal.

The Parish Council would like to thank Barbara Brown for this description of the stone and its possible origins.

The Parish Council would welcome residents' views on the future of the Cross and any additional information on its origins or history. Please contact the [Parish Clerk](#) either on-line or by post.