

Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society

The Stone Cross at Old St Oswald's Church, Fulford

Transcript of Prof. Jane Hawkes

This is a transcript of a video recording of Prof Jane Hawkes, speaking in the churchyard of the old church of St Oswald, in Fulford following the FFH Conference on 'The Historic Mystery of Old St Oswald's' on 10th June 2017. Transcribed by Rosemary Newman of FFH.

Prof Hawkes is adjacent to the church tower, with the cross fragment resting on a small plastic box, surrounded by a small group of people, including one of the speakers, Dr Eric Cambridge, and the owner of St Oswald's Hall, Allan Francis.

"From what you were saying Eric, it does put it pre-Earls by quite a bit, but it puts it within those first couple of generations of Scandinavians moving into the area. Now, if I was mathematically inclined, which I am not, but there are people who can reconstruct the likely dimensions of these monuments from something like this sort of fragment, because that preserves enough of the curve of the armpits to you tell you roughly how big one cross arm was, which is going to tell you roughly how big the other cross arm is, which allows you to hypothesize the centre between the two of them. Let's say that cross arm was originally as big across as this red box [approx. 350mm x 450mm] you then you have got a centre and then another cross arm. So, you have quite a big cross head, a generous cross head. You are not going to put that on something that's only this big [she indicates approx. 1.2m height] like the Middleton crosses. It's going to be a 'big fellow' [she indicates a height of approx. 2.0m].

I am even more convinced now, having seen this and having thought more about it and talked to people over lunch today about where the church is in relation to the river, and its closeness to the river. I think you are quite right that it would have been much closer to the river, with an incline down to it. It makes absolute sense with where these crosses were set up in landscape in early Medieval period. They put them on promontories where everybody is going to see them, where it's really going to stand up in front of them, where there is a really good access to see them. If you are coming around the bend [in the river] this promontory is really going to stand out with a cross on it. It's going to make it [the cross] really visible in the landscape. Whether this is [a river crossing or baptismal site] I don't think it's an either/or, but both. River crossing, possible baptismal site, land owned by someone with possible ecclesiastical associations. I don't think this fragment comes from a funereal cross. I think it was.... not more elaboratebut I think it had more ambition than just to mark the grave of someone, a different ambition.

Personally, I love to think of it as painted, as that would make that decoration much clearer. You've got that lovely central boss, which is one of the clear demarcators of reference to the [???] crosses and that goes on and on and on. You have got this boss here. I suspect it was not carved in deeply but there's certainly quite a lot of modelling was going on, [the cross fragment is turned over] yes, you can see the chip marks and chisel marks, it's brilliant isn't it. From other examples I have seen, they mark it out with chiselling, then they finish it off, although I suspect it was not cut in deeply. What we see is what we were not meant to see; we are seeing it without its clothing on because they knew it would be covered up. It would be interesting to test it to see if that is lime mortar, or something else.

Q? - Presumably after all this time you would not be able to see the traces of paint on it?

Jane: Well that's what this discussion is about; what this sort of thing is [pointing to the stone] whether that is lichen or left over mortar?

Q - *Allan Francis* [pointing to white markings on the stone] “what is interesting is that this is more suggestive of mortar, whereas this is more like a coating”. *Jane Hawkes* responds: ‘It would be very interesting to find the money and pay someone to come and look at it.’

Allan Francis says “I could never see what the image is on the other side.

Jane: I think this is going to be the Christmas Quiz.... (laughter). *Allan* says he remembers seeing a linear drawing around it but cannot remember what the relief was.

Jane: Eric is proposing there are two strands of interlace coming up there and presumably going up and round and back down again, you might be having one of those creatures in Scandinavian Art that have the lappet and interlace extensions coming out of the body.

To my mind, the jury is out on this but I don’t think it’s a human form. Not figurative...Certainly again you can see the chisel marks going through there. There is some sort of laser technology they came up with some years ago which can measure the amount of pounding that is done to stone, particularly with sandstone, which can be determined from the residual impact. I think it is some sort of laser technology, working from a sort of ‘echo system’ which can trace impact from where the stone has been chiselled away and impacted on the sand grains, and then you can see cut lines in theory. This can distinguish it from erosion.

I think it would be so interesting. The narratives one could construct about of where [the cross] stood in relation to whatever was on this site, as it is clearly a site that people would have been approached from different avenues. And, because the two sides are so different, there is clearly an understanding that people approaching from one side would see something different from those approaching from the other side; this is deliberate and suggests a lot of thinking went into its placement.

Eric Cambridge adds that in relation to a recent study in Nottinghamshire, just about every early elaborate cross is on a river crossing. He adds that they missed something however; re the dedication of these crossings [to St Chad].

Jane continues; That is really interesting. The work I have been doing at a tiny little church outside Derby at Wilne, very close to the border with Nottinghamshire, and I recently discovered that it is the site of a traditional crossing of a tributary of the Trent [the Derwent] that got wiped out in living memory. The cross at Wilne is a column that was tapered, and not quite as high as the Wolverhampton column but quite big and not unlike Masham, but possibly a little higher, although that one has lost its top. It was carved in registers like the Masham column, animal ornament set in arcading in registers again like Masham. And it is dedicated to Chad, although I don’t know how long the dedication goes back.

But, let’s face it, this is a very small piece of stone and we are creating big stories, but this is where research gets really interesting.

Q? Asking whether this cross might be a separate piece of stone on top of a column.

Jane responds. Very often they were monoliths, composite monuments. The Cross at Bewcastle is 16 feet high without the cross head, which would probably have added another 2’-6” on top of that, and a single block of stone all way up, with a tenon hole on top. The beauty of these crosses is that they knew to put the tenon hole at top slightly off centre, so the cross head could not be put on the wrong way round. The nature of the quarry determines what you can cut out and whether you have a composite or monolithic column. The stones at Middleton are all single stones. When you get a bit higher then you do the shaft and put the head on top.

In response to another Q asking how the cross would have been erected, Jane answered: I suspect they would be using very basic physics using lever, fulcrum and pulleys. From talking to physicists etc, I am now convinced that when you take something like a pillar of stone, once you have got it upright, you don't need an enormously big hole. Once the stone is upright and down in the hole the weight of the stone monument holds it in place. Now if ground slippage.....

Qr says: I meant about bringing the stone to site:

Jane answers. They probably used the river system, I suspect. It is much easier to float stones up river than to haul over a broken Roman road.

Continuing the line of thought about Anglo- Saxon crosses and ground holes; all these crosses have base stones, they didn't go straight into earth. Sometimes, the base would be about 2x size of the red box [700mm x 900mm] and about as deep, with a hole in middle, but not very deep. The base stone is what gets buried in the ground with most of the Anglo-Saxon crosses, with a little showing above. Which in my mind is really exciting; where the whole of a plant scroll, a tree, literally grows out of the ground. One at Lindisfarne and at Bishop Auckland, one in Yorkshire at Rastrick where they have quite substantial carved base stones and cross put on top; this is very rare in Anglo Saxon England, although standard across Ireland. I think the Irish were just trying to do something different. Just as you rarely get plant scrolls on Irish ones.

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The video is available to watch at; <https://ffhyork.weebly.com/st-oswalds-churches.html>