

Village Cross to War Memorial – 12.6.14 (copy for Parish Newsletter)

I am going to start with a footnote. This footnote is on page 100 of Volume V of the Victoria County History of Oxford. It is footnote no 61 and it reads: 'The cross was moved in 1857'. The text on the page above tells us that the cross previous to 1857 'stood near the point where the road forks to the church'. I think that must refer to the road from Wheatley that curves to the right to enter the present High Street and that bifurcation, that forking, (one road going into the main street and the other down to the Mill) must have been felt in medieval times to be the significant centre of the village and therefore where the presence of God amongst the dwellings of the people of the village is known. What practical purpose a medieval cross served is not clearly known. Sometimes they are called 'preaching crosses' and one may envisage a travelling friar or perhaps Chaucer's disreputable Pardoner, standing on the step of the cross preaching repentance or the sale of indulgences, perhaps even preaching the crusades but this is, I believe, largely fantasy though Emma and Mark undoubtedly know more about this...so I had better move on. What I am trying to say is that, over and above any practical purpose – marking a boundary, signifying a cross roads, whatever – the medieval village crosses must have had a symbolic meaning for the people who lived near them. God was in the middle of their lives.

Now the footnote also directs us to a manuscript in the Bodleian Library which is a print of 1804 showing the cross close to the stocks (Kathy has placed a copy of that print on display). The cross in 1804 looks remarkably similar to how it looks now. It is very simple: a broken shaft is set in a collar of stones and the whole thing consists of four steps. Indeed, its removal to the relative security of the churchyard in 1857 was probably the result of vandalism and a desire to avoid the head of the cross from being yet again pushed off the shaft. It is quite possible that this was a recurrent problem because the Footnote also tells us that the cross had been repaired in 1769 and in 1813. If the head of the cross was replaced after the print of 1805, in the renovation of 1813, it would have lasted only about 40 years. The Victorians did a more thorough job and the cross piece that they stuck on the shaft went on into at least the post Second World War period but inevitably it fell and has a resting place on the sill of the little window in the west porch.

One might just pause to ask how old is the shaft and collar of the cross. The SODC conservation officer who saw it last month in connection with our bid to return the cross to near its original position thought that it was contemporary with the core of the church itself which would bring it into the last quarter of the 12th century, around 1180. It may be a bit later than that but it has certainly seen centuries of Cuddesdon life and deserves our respect. In spite of its battered condition, it still has a certain simple presence and the intention is that it be honoured and invested with the sort of symbolic meaning that it can now have for us in the 21st century, namely a visible reminder of the huge sacrifice of those who died as a result of participating in the greatest collective evil to which we are prone, namely war.

It is quite surprising that Cuddesdon has no public and visible village war memorial. The college has one that can be seen as one passes on the road and we have this touching and very simple little wooden war shrine in the church which must for the decades that followed the wars have been the focus of the mourning of those who were bereaved of their sons, lovers, husbands, fathers. In 1919, the then Principal of the college and Vicar of the village, the Revd James Buchanan Seaton, proposed at the first meeting of the then newly founded PCC that the medieval cross become the war memorial. It did not happen but now nearly a hundred years later, we have that opportunity again and this time it will be largely funded from a generous grant obtained through the hard work of Keith and Kathy.

In practical terms, we have begun the process of thinking out what this move will involve. A legal agreement with G. R. Nixey Ltd., from whom the Green was obtained by the Parish Council in 1975, and which forbids the erection of any structures on the land, has to be modified or removed and Mike Mount is already preparing an application to effect this on behalf of the PC. Then listed buildings consent must be applied for, concurrently with full planning permission. Mike has also kindly agreed to pursue those and at that stage the usual notices of intention will be placed on the Green and any formal objections can be made through the usual channels. At the same time, I shall prepare a request for a faculty from the Diocesan authority, the Registrar, for us to move the cross out of the churchyard. That request must be preceded by a presentation of the plans to the Diocesan Advisory Committee.

These permissions all require the support of carefully presented plans, elevations and proposals for the use of appropriate replacement stone and mortar. We have a preliminary conservation report from John Guest of Oxford Lime Mortar, who did the repointing of the south and west walls last year. But we are really fortunate in having some very experienced architects in this village and Gilbert Howes and John Cook have already started the process of thinking out the site and the sort of adaptations that might be made to the structure. I think I should say that we are not far advanced along this road yet. We have not decided exactly where the cross should go or exactly how the memorial aspect of the monument should be made evident. One thing is, however, certain: we shall not be replacing the upper part of the cross. The conservation officer has said that drilling into the medieval shaft would not be permitted and, even if it were permitted, the result would be precarious in the extreme and the vandalism that caused the structure's removal to the churchyard could easily be repeated. So, the shaft will remain as it is, a broken cross, and as such it will have deep symbolic meaning in relation to its new function, which is to honour our war dead.