

Village Cross to War Memorial (Copy for Parish Newsletter November 2015)

In the section that describes Cuddesdon in Volume V of The Victoria County History of Oxford (VCH), there is a footnote. It is on page 100 and it simply reads: 'The cross was moved in 1857'. The text on the page above tells us that previous to 1857 the cross 'stood near the point where the road forks to the church'. I think that must refer to the fork that confronts us as we come up the High Street from the west. It must have been felt in medieval times to be the significant centre of the village. Last month, after spending 158 years in the churchyard, the cross was returned to within fifty yards of that original position.

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 suppose, largely my fantasy. Over and above any practical purpose – marking a boundary, signifying a cross roads, a place where business might be done – medieval village crosses, and there are thousands of them throughout the country, must have had a symbolic meaning for the people who lived near them: God was in the midst of their lives.

The footnote in the VCH also directs us to a manuscript in the Bodleian Library, a drawing of 1804 by John Natt, who was Vice-President of St John's College, Oxford and an amateur artist. This drawing shows the cross close to the stocks and next to a pub that must have once stood on The Green. In 1804 it looked remarkably similar to how it looks now. It is very simple: a broken shaft set in a collar of four steps. It is quite possible that the loss of the cross head has been a recurrent problem in the history of our cross because the footnote also tells us that the cross had been repaired in 1769 and in 1813. When the Victorians moved the cross in 1857, into the relative security of the churchyard, they doweled the shaft with iron rods and stuck a new cross head on it which lasted until after the Second World War. Inevitably it fell and now rests on the sill of the little window in the west porch of the church.

How old is the shaft and collar of the cross? One conservation officer 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 simple, powerful presence and that is why we felt that it could now become honoured as a war memorial and the focus for our Remembrance Sunday Service. It is quite surprising that Cuddesdon has previously had no public and visible village war memorial. The college has one that can be seen from the road and we have in the church a touching and very simple little wooden war shrine which must for the decades that followed the wars have been the focus of mourning for the fallen. In 1919, the 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 should become the war memorial. It did not happen then but now, nearly a hundred years later, it has happened, initiated in a conversation between me and Martyn Percy in the summer of 2013 and largely funded by a £10,000 grant from Heritage Lottery under their 'First World War: Then and Now' scheme, a grant

obtained through the hard work of Keith and Kathy Hawley acting on behalf of the joint applicants for the grant: the Parish Council and the Parochial Church Council. The PCC supplemented this grant with a contribution of £5,000, nearly half of which has been covered by a generous anonymous donation.

Some of this money has funded a vitally important part of the whole project: an investigation into the experience of the people of Cuddesdon and Denton during the First World War. This included researching the history of those who fought, of life in the village and of the part played by the college. This community research project, culminates in a dramatic presentation in the church on 7th November, an exhibition in the Village Hall on Remembrance Sunday after the war memorial has been dedicated, additional material on the village web-site and the permanent establishment of an archive housed in the college. It has been very ably led by Kathy Hawley, who has worked extraordinarily hard, and out of this research project will come the first part of a permanent village archive to be housed in the college.

At an early stage in discussions, there was a desire to restore the whole cross and reinstate the Victorian cross head but this proved impossible for a number of reasons: the medieval stump would not easily bear the weight of additional stone; further drilling into the stump to allow for dowelling would damage it and would not, anyway, be permitted by the conservation officers; such a reconstruction would be very fragile and any untoward pressure put on the shaft would result in its once again breaking off; furthermore, a full reconstruction would carry the overall cost well beyond the available grant money. We are left with a weathered and broken shaft but, as John Paxton pointed out in the public meeting that took place in the church on the 29th May 2014, the broken shaft has a nobility of its own and is a powerfully symbolic reference to the frailty of a humanity that engages in the ultimate evil of warfare.

A huge amount of careful thought went into the process of designing the move and resolving issues of planning and consent. John Cook, Gilbert Howse, two retired architects with extensive conservation experience, and I looked at every aspect of positioning, removal, foundations and replacement of stone. Planning permission had to be obtained from two authorities: SODC and the Diocese of Oxford. Both were encouraging. SODC directed that the cross should not affect the roots of two trees on The Green and should not be under the power cable that crosses it. That left very little choice but we were pleased to settle for a position that is in alignment with the road so that the monument may be clearly seen as we drive up the High Street. The diocesan planning authority was the more demanding and rejected our initial proposal to replace decayed stone with a step of Portland stone inscribed with names of the fallen. We consulted with Philip Powell, formerly curator of geology at the Oxford University Museum, who confirmed that the stone of the cross was all Wheatley stone and helped us identify a number of pieces of similar stone in the churchyard and also in two derelict cottages down towards the river. These have been incorporated in the renovated monument. We found, when the cross was dismantled, that the Victorians had created a new bottom step, more of a blocked curb and with less inward depth than the huge pieces of stone in the second and third steps above it. An inscription in gothic lettering, recorded as 'illegible' when examined in the 1970s, had been carved into this base step presumably going around three sides of the monument. However, that bottom step was more decayed than the ones above and only two useable pieces with lettering remained. They have been incorporated into the rebuilt war memorial in

the positions in which they were found and, with the sun creating the right shadows, it is just possible to make out 'JESUS CHRIST +' on the stone in the bottom right hand corner as you face the new bronze inscription.

What has made this project so positive and enjoyable has been working with other people in the community. I have mentioned the huge contribution made by John Cooke, who prepared numerous beautiful architectural drawings for the various planning applications, and Gilbert Howse, who contributed the wisdom of a long architectural experience. Mike Mount managed the financial arrangements with skill and precision and saw through the complex business of making application for Listed Building Consent and Planning Permission. It was necessary too for a legal agreement with G. R. Nixey Ltd., from whom the Green was obtained by the Parish Council in 1975, and which forbade the erection of any structures on the land, to be removed. The Parish Council, chaired by Martyn Percy, was always supportive and the PCC generous in donating the balance of necessary funds. We were lucky to find in John Guest, of Oxford Lime Mortar, the perfect contractor, able to reconstruct the monument with care and skill. He had been consulted at an early stage in the development of the project and we were relieved that his tender was felt by the Parish Council to be the most favourable of those received. We were lucky too to come across the Anglia Sign Company of Norwich in the course of seeking tenders for the bronze plaque. We think all will agree that the overall result is a dignified and restrained war memorial that preserves something of the distant past and heritage of Cuddesdon and enables us to honour those of college and village who enlisted and then gave their lives in the world wars of the last century.

Robert Wilson