

Consecration Crosses on Somerset and Dorset Churches

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ONE of the chief things of interest at Yetminster Church is an almost complete series of consecration crosses on the outside of the walls. What are these crosses and why are they there? Most of us are familiar with the fact that a mediæval altar slab usually has five crosses, or sometimes six, cut upon it. These also are consecration crosses, and the crosses on the walls of churches are of exactly the same kind. They mark the place where both church and altar were anointed by the bishop during the service of dedication or consecration—and they form a permanent record of the action. Their use probably developed at a later period than the act of anointing, and whereas the crosses on church walls were more usually only painted, those on altars came to be uniformly cut.

Liturgical scholars seem agreed that in very early times the consecration of a church was effected by the celebration of the eucharist within its walls by the bishop of the diocese: other rites and ceremonies were added in course of time. Of these, two groups of ceremonies, originally distinct, came to be united in the elaborate form of service which developed in the Middle Ages. The one group came from Rome with Roman missionaries; the other grew up in other parts of Europe and may be called Gallican. The chief sacred sites in Rome were connected with the graves of martyrs; it was the body of the martyr which made the holy place. Hence the burial of the relics of a saint came to be felt desirable to hallow the ground

for a church or the site of an altar, and so we find the inclusion of relics in an altar looked on as essential and the act of placing them there as the chief act of consecration of church or altar. But there were other views which prevailed where martyrs were scarce and where there had not been persecutions, and where the burial idea was associated with paganism. In such surroundings the consecration of the church was modelled upon the ceremonies accompanying the baptism of a christian; the church was sprinkled with water and anointed with oil. Both sets of rites came to be combined in one long service, though with many variations of form and ceremony throughout Western Europe in the early Middle Ages. Among these variations there is one that concerns consecration crosses. On the Continent these crosses were, and still are, only placed *inside* the church. Here in England—and it was the same in Scotland—crosses were also used outside, as we see in the cases where consecration crosses have survived in the West of England.

Let us turn to the evidence of liturgical books. The rubrics in pontificals—the books which contain the services with which the bishop is concerned—become more explicit as time goes on. In one fifteenth century pontifical the rubric describes two methods of consecration. One, the Roman, with inside crosses only; the other, the English (*modus Anglicane ecclesie*), which also has crosses outside. Our earliest English pontifical, that connected with the name of Egbert (Archbishop of York, 732–766) directs the bishop to make crosses inside with chrism, without giving the number or ordering them to be marked. In the tenth century anointings are also to be made outside.¹ In the twelfth century twelve places are ordered both inside and out. In the fifteenth century red crosses are to be marked at equal distances with iron branches for candles² fixed to the tops of the surrounding circles.³ According to the pontifical of Archbishop Bainbridge of York, 1508–14, the bishop censes the inside crosses, a deacon those outside.

The Roman books order the crosses to be 7 feet above the

¹ In one MS. inside only.

² B.M. Lansdowne 451, probably for a bishop of London.

³ Bishop Lacy of Exeter, 1420–55.

ground and to be three on each wall ; arrangements sometimes but not always found in this country. So also do certain Gallican pontificals.

The candles were lighted on the annual feast of dedication abroad and this may have been done here, but English rules do not order it. Sometimes the crosses seem to have been repainted when the walls were redecorated.¹ Sometimes they were painted out : there are cases where crosses have been found covered with wall-paintings of not much later date. In mediæval England there does not seem to have been the same development of a *cultus* of the crosses as took place abroad.

Some great buildings retain elaborate examples : of these Salisbury Cathedral is the most outstanding instance with no less than ten inside and ten outside, the former painted, the latter prepared for metal inlays and provided with holes for candle brackets.

At Ottery St. Mary, where there is the abnormal number of thirteen outside, the crosses are held by carved angels in circles.

Many a church was built of rough material and rendered outside with the mortar of which it was built and then white-washed. In all these cases, and in many others, the crosses were probably painted, like the inside crosses, and have disappeared. It is in cases where good stone was used outside that carved or incised crosses have come down to us. Many a consecration cross must have been destroyed by nineteenth-century restorers with the passion for scraping walls and for uniform renewals. But even where there is good stone, cut or incised crosses must have been exceptional.

Beside the rough walls that must have been covered with plaster or limewash, there is abundance of ashlar work still remaining in fine condition, with no trace of crosses. For example, in all the granite-faced churches of Cornwall there does not seem to be a single consecration cross remaining, save only at Liskeard.

It must always be borne in mind that many mediæval

¹ 'Et de iijd Will^o Braile pro factura vij cruces infra Ecclesiam.' *Churchwardens' Accounts of St. Michael's, Bath* (1479-80). Taunton, 1878, p. 82. This follows a payment for 'Whitlymyng'.

churches remained unconsecrated for long periods of time. Bishops were few, their dioceses were large, and they were often occupied with affairs of state. Travelling was difficult, the service of consecration long and exacting. The constitutions of Cardinal Otho in 1236 and those of Othobonus in 1268 both complain of these delays and ordered bishops to consecrate hitherto unconsecrated churches, in the one case within two years, in the other within a year.¹

I only know of the full normal number of external crosses as surviving at Crosthwaite in Cumberland, the parish church of Keswick, where there are also nine internal crosses, and where all are believed to date from a consecration in the reign of Queen Mary; there the crosses are arranged in sixes on the side walls.

A complete set of internal crosses exists at Roslin Collegiate Church, near Edinburgh.

The nearest we have to both sets complete in the same church is at Edington in Wiltshire, with ten outside and eleven inside. The case of Uffington in Berkshire is similar to Yetminster, viz., eleven out of the twelve outside and none remaining within. Nine out of the twelve painted internal crosses exist in Henry VII's Chapel, Westminster Abbey.

In Somerset we have some remarkable examples of external consecration crosses, in one case a number in excess of the rubrical twelve presenting a difficult problem. This is at Cannington where there are no less than seventeen floriated crosses in relief, without surrounding circles, all between 5 ft. and 6 ft. above ground level. The late Rev. E. S. Dewick who had studied such crosses more than anyone, wrote, 'I can only hazard the guess that twenty-four crosses may have been made to order, with a view to placing twelve inside and twelve outside, and that when it was decided to dispense with carved crosses on the inside, they were used promiscuously on the outside.'²

¹ E. S. Dewick, 'Consecration Crosses and the Ritual connected with them', *Archæol. Journ.* lxxv, 1-34. This paper is a mine of information to which the present writer is much indebted, and contains full references to MSS. which I have thought it unnecessary to repeat here.

² See a second paper on consecration crosses by Mr. Dewick in *Transactions of St. Paul's Ecclesiological Society*, vol. vii, pt. v, pp. 177 *seq.*, in which the crosses at Chedzoy, Cannington, and Moorlinch are illustrated.

At Moorlinch are ten large carved external crosses, all in the chancel, four on each side and two at the east end. They take the form of crosses in relief formed by circular sunk panels, each surrounded by a deep incised line. They are cut in sandstone blocks inserted in lias walls.

At Chedzoy there are two crosses on the south and two on the north wall of the nave, seemingly of the thirteenth century. Here the crosses are in relief in circular sinkings, and they have small roses in the centres and at the ends of the arms.

In the Lady Chapel at Glastonbury, which has often been called St. Joseph's chapel, and was consecrated by Reginald Bishop of Bath in 1186, are remarkable traces of nine internal and eight external crosses. The crosses themselves are gone, but about 9 feet above the ground are groups of holes for fixtures at regular intervals, three groups on each wall, north, south and west. These may have held metal crosses or perhaps more likely candle sconces before painted crosses which have long since disappeared.

At Barwick, close to Yeovil, there are seven external crosses left in relief within circular sinkings, a little over 6 in. wide. Three of these are at the west end, one in the nave on a stone of the west doorway and one on each aisle: one can be seen on the north wall, another on the south wall, and there is one on each of the angle buttresses of the largely rebuilt chancel.

Crossing into Dorset we find nine more crosses at Nether Compton, three inside, six outside. Here the internal crosses are carved like those outside: two are on the stones forming the north and south doorways, one in the splay of a window. Of the external crosses two are on the stones of the doorways; the rest are on the walls of the nave and the tower.

At Yetminster there is one of the finest sets of external crosses in England. All but one of the twelve remain. They are three on each side, and evidently date from after the rebuilding of the nave and tower early in the fifteenth century, when the church must have been consecrated. This is evidently one of those cases where the chancel, if not the rest of the church, must have stood unconsecrated since the thirteenth century, for the crosses upon it are of the same period as those on the rest of the church.

The crosses are cut in the stone by sinking a circular background, leaving the cross itself in relief; each circle is surrounded by an incised line or ring. The sizes vary from 11 in. to 13 in. over all, except in the case of the central cross over the west doorway which is only about 4 in. in diameter.

The crosses are arranged, as follows:—

East End. Two: one on each angle buttress; above the plinth moulding on the south buttress, below it on the north. The central cross cannot be found; probably it was of small size in the middle of the window sill. The stone is somewhat worn here, but it may have been renewed at some time. On the analogy of the central cross at the west end it would have been very small.

South side. Three: one on a stone forming the side of the west-most chancel window; the middle one on the buttress close to the west of the south doorway; the third on the south buttress at the south-west corner of the tower.

West end. Three: one on each of the two buttresses on the west face of the tower, the central cross on the stone forming the top of the west doorway, on the flat surface of the stone below the label or hood-moulding.

North side. Three: two on chancel and tower corresponding in place to those on the south side, the middle cross being near the west end of the aisle, on a stone forming the side of the window between the porch and the west end.

There are no traces of the internal crosses, for most unfortunately the walls were replastered when the church was restored in 1889.

It is worth noting that some of the crosses at Nether Compton and Yetminster occur on the towers: this seems to dispose of the idea sometimes met with that the tower of a medieval church was not consecrated.