

ON THE ANCIENT CROSSES INCISED ON THE CHILTERN
HILLS AT MONKS RISBOROUGH AND BLEDLOW,
IN THE COUNTY OF BUCKINGHAM.

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WHITELEAF or WHITECLIFT CROSS is the title given to the gigantic figure of a Latin Cross incised on the steep chalky side of one of the Chiltern Hills, in the parish of Monks Risborough, about seven miles south of Aylesbury. Whiteleaf, according to the traditional orthography, is the name of a little hamlet at the foot of the hill, and probably expresses the correct pronunciation of the Saxon title, whether the conjecture be allowed or not, that it is derived from Wiglife,* the grandson of Woden, and father of Hengist and Horsa; with which latter heroes the monument is popularly associated. Whiteclift appears to be merely an ingenious modern gloss, suggested by the colour of the soil and precipitous character of the ground on which the cross is cut; it is adopted, however, to the Inclosure Act (9 George IV.) and the Commissioners Award, by which this "ancient memorial or land-mark" (so styled) is declared to be public property, and a parcel of allotment is reserved to the Lord of the Manor, as compensation for his enforced expense of its perpetual maintenance in repair.

The shaft of the Cross springs from a triangular-shaped base, which reaches to the foot of the hill, at an oblique angle, formed by the natural slope of the surface. But, viewed from a distance, it appears to rise perpendicularly and stand out in relief, on a plain superficies; though this effect depends probably, in some measure, on the state of the atmosphere through which it is seen. *

* Lipscomb says, "Whitleg, who was a warrior and hero, reputed one of the six sons of Woden, approaches so nearly to the name of Whiteleaf, as almost to tempt to a notion, that those names are of the same family." Wise, speaking of the Red Horse, of Warwickshire, says, "The Giant of Cerne is never, as I could learn, called the White Giant, nor Whiteleaf Cross, the White Cross; whereas, *if the colour of the soil* was the only reason for the epithet, they are as much entitled to it as the Horse." Further observations on White Horse, &c., p. 50.

The dimensions, which were accurately taken by the writer of this paper, on the 22nd of March, 1848, are as follows:— The hypothenuse of the triangular base 340 feet; the right-hand side 234 feet; the left 212 feet. The perpendicular rising from the centre of the base to the top of the Cross 230 feet. Height of the shaft of the Cross 50 feet; with 25 feet; length of each arm 30 feet; width 20 feet.

The difference of length between corresponding members of the figure (*e.g.*, between the opposite sides of the base) appears to be owing to the inequalities of the ground, and does not strike the eye of the observer.

It should be remarked that the dimensions of the base given by Wise, on the authority of "an ingenious friend," in A.D. 1742, represent it as of scarcely half the above size. If, therefore, his friend's measurement be correct, (and he claims especial accuracy), it is probable that the cutting did not originally extend to the bottom of the hill. Indeed, the base does now seem disproportionate to the size of the Cross above.

The gigantic stature of the figure, and its singularly conspicuous elevation, overlooking the Vale of Aylesbury into Oxfordshire, render it one of the most striking and magnificent monuments of antiquity in the county of Buckingham. Wise *supposes* it may be seen from the White Horse Hill in Berkshire, at the distance of nearly thirty miles; it is certainly visible from Shotover and Headington Hills, near Oxford, about fifteen miles across the open country. Bursting for the first time upon the eye of the traveller from the northern direction, at a sudden bend of the road, it presents an awful and almost spectral apparition of the Sign of the Son of Man, looming heavenwards above the peaceful valley, beside the ancient and everlasting hills; suggestive, and, as it were, symbolically illustrative of those words of the saintly author of the Imitation, — "*Ambula ubi vis quaere quodcumque volueris, et non invenies altiore viam supra nec securiorem viam infra, nisi viam sanctae crucis.*" (*S. Thomas a Kempis. De Imit. Christ, lib. ii. c. 12.*)

The Cross is situated in the midst of a locality not only distinguished for its romantic wildness and beauty of surrounding landscape, but full of exceedingly interesting Archaeological remains and associations. A few yards

only below runs the Roman or British Icknield (or, as the poor people in the neighbourhood call it, the Hackney) Road, with numerous camps and stations occurring at intervals along its line. The parish of Monks Risborough takes its name from the Monks of S. Augustine, of Canterbury, to whom it was attached as a cell, and has remained, until the recent abolition of Peculiars, subject to the jurisdiction of that See. The adjoining parishes of the two Kimbles, Magna and Parva, scarcely require the authentication of tradition to the origin of their title from the British King Cunobeline or Cymbeline, who is said to have held his Court here; and Princes Risborough, on the other side, is historically associated with the Black Prince, whose palace (or castle) is still pointed out on the outskirts of the little town. The names of several other places in the neighbourhood are plainly of Saxon derivation; and some few appear etymologically indebted to the Picts and Danes.

There is accordingly a large field of conjecture for the ingenuity of antiquarians to exercise upon, in seeking for the origin of the monument in itself. Leland unfortunately seems to have just missed it, passing from Aylesbury to Wendover, the Missendens, Amersham, and so onwards to Uxbridge out of the county. And Camden does not mention it in his *Britannia*. The additions, however, made by more recent editors of this latter work, introduce a short notice, borrowed from Wise, whose theory on the subject, contained in a letter to Dr. Meade, relating to the White Horse of Berkshire, has been also adopted by Gough, Lysons, Lipscomb, and other modern topographers.

It is supposed by him to be a trophy of victory analogous to the White Horse, but of later date, when the latter device was exchanged for the Christian symbol upon the standard of the converted Saxons. The triangular base he considers to be the Globe, or rather Altar, of the Cross; and refers to the *crux victorialis* (which superseded the figure of a winged victory springing from a Globe or Altar), as represented in the coins of the Roman Emperors after Constantine, erected sometimes on a Globe, sometimes on an Altar-like tier of three or more steps, gradually decreasing towards the top one,

This plausible conjecture affords very little clue to the particular victory commemorated at Whiteleaf. It places it, however, at a much later period than that assigned by the tradition already referred to, which connects it with the exploits of Hengist and Horsa. He attributes the occasion to some victory gained by the West Saxon Christians over the Pagan Danes; and supposes that the neighbouring village of Bledlow (Bloody Hill) marks the very field of battle. He then quotes the Saxon Chronicle as relating a predatory incursion of the Danes into Buckinghamshire, between Ailsbury and Bernwood Forest, in the year A.D. 921; when he conjectures that the battle which led to the erection of the trophy was fought and won by the Saxon subjects of the Elder Edward, the son and successor of King Alfred. If Matthew Paris be correctly cited by Dr. Lipscomb, as expressly alleging a slaughter of Danes on *this* occasion at Bledlow, the theory is too complete to be treated as a mere naked surmise; only it is surprising that Wise has not mentioned this authority.*

He does not appear to have been aware of the existence of a second Cross, traditionally coeval, incised on a still more prominent and loftier hill in the parish itself of Bledlow. This latter monument, however, is of much smaller dimensions, and of the Greek form, with four equal limbs, 80 feet by 15 each, as measured by the writer on the Feast of the Annunciation, in the year 1848. It has no base; and is placed near to the brow of the hill, in a less conspicuous situation. The hill itself is thickly wooded upon one side, and tufted all over with junipers and other shrubs; while the figure of the Cross is, through many years neglect, overgrown with weeds, and presents a much less sharply defined outline than the one at Monks Bisborough. The two hills are connected, at the distance of about three miles, by the Icknield Road, which runs closely under the foot of both.

The different forms of the Crosses destroy the probability of their being erected at the same time to com-

* The writer has not yet discovered the reference in Matthew Paris. A correspondent well qualified to judge, in writing on the subject, says, scarcely too severely, of Dr. Lipscomb's work, "As far as I have been able to trace his statements, nothing in them which is true is new, and nothing which is new is true."

morate the same event. May not that of Bledlow Ridge have been the original memorial, and suggested the position of the other, as on a more conspicuous spot, where it might have served the further purpose of a Wayside Cross, and have marked also the consecrated character of the ground in the neighbourhood of the cell of Monks; the Monks themselves being, is it not obvious to conjecture, the authors of the monument? A right of sanctuary, or demarcation of Church lands, may have been included in the intention. For all these purposes are attributed to the numerous standard Crosses of stone, which are found in every part of the country, — and may have furnished a type for the form of this. On this supposition, the triangular base should be an imitation of the pedestal in which the shaft was ordinarily fixed. A surprising number of these Crosses are recorded, together with some interesting explanatory remarks, in the "Ecclesiologist" of February, 1848; and also in a paper by Mr. Haslam, in the "Archaeological Journal," of December, 1847.

It remains only to mention that a custom analogous to that of scouring the White Horse periodically, commented on by Wise, was observed in the case of the two Crosses, but has now become obsolete. The one on Bledlow Ridge (it has been ascertained by the writer) was thoroughly cleaned and repaired about fifteen years ago; but with no particular public festival; and had not been previously, within the memory of man. That at Monks Risborough, it has been already intimated, is repaired from time to time, as a condition of tenure, by the Lord of the Manor. Wise records a local tradition (which still remains), that part of the cost of cleansing was borne by some of the Colleges of Oxford; Christ Church is particularly mentioned.* The Manor of Bledlow is attached

* The writer, on enquiry at Oxford, is unable to trace any connexion of either Cross with Christ Church. The following extract from a private letter of a resident in the county, of literary notoriety (received since the above Paper was prepared), connects the one at "Whiteleaf with St. John's College:—

"The late Sir Scrope Bernard Morland made such enquiry into the story of the Saunderton Plain Fight, which is but a dark and traditionary story, fortified, however, by the name of *Horsenden* (quaere, the head quarters or *resting place* of Horsa, the night before the battle), and Bledlow (the Bloody Field—an Anglo-Saxon compound). He also made it out plausibly enough, from the number of Saxon and British names of places round, such as Eaglisburgh (Aylesbury), Weston, Tring, Wing, and Ivinghoe (of *poetical*

to Eton College; which, it is understood (from information obtained in the parish), was at the expense of the last scouring. It is hoped that further enquiry will result in information, which may throw more light upon the history of these very interesting remains.

memory), Halton, Aston Clinton, Wycombe, Hughenden, Missenden, Ellesborough, Hampden, &c. &c., all Anglo-Saxon derivatives, of later date than the Via Icenii (Icknield Way) and Wendover and Kimble (British), the latter of them a Palace or Strong Hold of Cunobeline or Cymbeline, that that country was an important Boundary Line of Defence held by Britons and Saxons alternately—all confirmatory of the Story of the Battles in the Buckinghamshire and Berkshire Vales adjoining the Chilterns. But Sir Bernard Morland's notion was that the Whiteleaf Cross was a *later* monument, raised by the *Christian* Saxons, probably where some older monument had been on the Hill on which the Brothers had raised their victorious standard to recall their troops from the pursuit. He believed he had traced some tenure by which the Monks of St. John, in Oxford, were bound to keep Whiteleaf Cross in repair, and that the Mount in the Garden of St. John's College, Oxford, was raised to enable the Monks to pray in *sight* of the Whiteleaf Cross over Risborough. And, I remember, as a boy, going to the Mount in St. John's College Gardens to ascertain whether it was *possible*, before the Mount was covered with trees, and before the now intervening buildings were built, to see Whiteleaf Hill from thence — and it appeared to me that it *was*."

A Fellow of Eton College, in a private letter, says—

"This College are Lords of the Manor of Bledlow, and have held property there in woods and other lands ever since the Foundation in 1441. But in respect to keeping the Cross on the side of the Hill clean, no one is aware of any such service. I have asked the Bursar, who has been a member nearly thirty years, and he knows nothing of such a claim or service. I believe nothing exists in our archives about Bledlow, further than it is mentioned in the Charter of Endowment."

The writer would take this opportunity of thanking several clergymen, and other residents in the county, who have kindly communicated with him on the subject.