The High Crosses Of Kilfenora

BY LUBA KAFTANNIKOV

The National Monuments Department of the Board of Works has recently completed further valuable and creditable work at Kilfenora, Co. Clare.

Ten years ago the shaft of a High Cross, carved in beautiful and unique designs, was discovered lying on the ground in the churchyard of Kilfenora Cathedral. Its upper portion was missing. A year later, two young students of architecture, staying in the neighbourhood, were told about this discovery by the finder, who suggested that they should search for the upper portion. This they did, and quite soon found the upper part, which fitted exactly.

For the next five years it was impossible to interest anybody with authority in this discovery, although the Thomond Archæological Journal did print a short article and some drawings of the Cross. In 1950 the present Inspector of National Monuments saw the Cross for the first time, and was anxious that it should be re-erected immediately: there were many obstacles in the way. However, the Cross has now been cleaned and erected.

The west face, which was concealed when the shaft lay on the ground, shows, at the base, a horseman mounted and complete except that the face has, most unfortunately, been somewhat defaced. Bridle and reins are carefully carved, and the horse appears to be rising into the air from the roof of (perhaps) a Church. A wide, ribbon interlacing, of the Viking type, flows freely to the top of the shaft, and contains some delicate internal carving. The figure of the horseman is reminiscent of that on the Bealin Cross. The shaft is surmounted by a crucifixion figure, somewhat defaced.

The east face of the Cross, so long subjected to the weather as it lay turned skywards, is very closely carved. A Bishop on the upper portion has an angel (?) on each shoulder and he holds the Irish type crozier. He is bestowing his benediction downwards as if upon the two figures with linked arms which are carved beneath him. One of these monk-like figures carries the Tau-headed staff of the eastern Church, and the other the “shepherd’s crook” used in western Europe. (An interesting feature of this Cross is that it displays three types of Crozier). Beneath these figures a great bird is shown, apparently whispering into the ear of one of the two heads—now smooth and featureless—at the base of the shaft. The carving on this portion of the Cross suggests an early form of surrealism! In addition to the heads there are arms which reach up to grasp the legs of the
bird, and two other quite disjointed arms. There is also in a corner, one foot, with the sole turned outwards, suggesting that here were two complete people for whom no space could be found, although they were an integral part of the sculptured story. It has been impossible to trace any legend about a bird, but the people speak of a monastery and hospital, run by friars or monks, a few hundred yards from the Church: the walls of this building may still be seen—there are various stories about it, and its connection with the Church.

Tradition affirms that Kilfenora once possessed seven High Crosses. One on each road leading to the Church, and three standing around it. Westropp had doubts about this, but as we now have visible evidence of six carved crosses it seems likely that tradition is once more correct. There are now five at Kilfenora—three complete and portions of two others, all now erected, as well as the cross at Killaloe. Regarding this High Cross, removed from Kilfenora to Killaloe in 1821, the present writer, having been told some years ago that the site of a cross could still be seen half a mile north of the Church, made some enquiries, and eventually found an old man who admitted to some knowledge of a site. After talk of this and that it transpired that the site was on his land, and finally he offered to show the place. The site, a heap of stones surrounding a still visible socket of well-cut stone, was in a corner of a field near a road. “Some came by night in my grandfather’s time,” the old man said, “and they lifted out the Cross that was in it, and they took it away.” His grandfather might well have been living in 1821.

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