Greasby village crosses

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This note aims to show that the two inscribed stones which form part of the northern boundary wall of Greasby Old Hall, Greasby, Wirral (Figure 32), are the remains of the first village cross, the original site of which is shown on several OS Sheets. Local opinion suggests (Spencer 1997) that these stones had an even earlier use as a grave slab or memorial stone. Supporting evidence for this will be discussed.

Oakes (1966, 14) defined three types (plus miscellaneous) of designs for pre-Norman crosses in Cheshire: 'A second type, because of its provenance known as the Wirral type, is specially distinguished by a four-holed or wheel-shaped cross head, where the arms of the cross are disposed about a continuous circle. This type was developed in Cheshire itself although its ultimate place of origin was the Norwegian-speaking settlements of Ireland and the Isle of Man'.

The modern village cross, made from cast iron in 1862 and moved to its present position in late 1945 (Frankby Parish Magazine, December 1945) is certainly of this design. The plaque attached to the base of the cross in 1970 states that it is '... a replica of Greasby's ancient hiring cross ...' (Figures 33 and 34).

Brownbill (1928, 292) wrote that 'The remains of the "ancient cross" on the green, indicated on the ordnance map of 1860, were cleared away about that time, and in an adjacent enclosure an iron cross of the Celtic type, standing in three new stone steps, was erected by Mr Shaw, with his initials upon it I R S 1862'.

Brownbill is usually extremely accurate and concise, and so the reference to the 'ordnance map of 1860' is puzzling; the 1 inch to the mile scale is too small to show such detail, the 6 inch plans were reduced from the 25 inch survey (Hindle, 1988, 128-131) the first edition of the relevant sheet only being surveyed in 1874, and neither this nor the tithe plan of 1849 mark the cross at all.

Although Brownbill maintains that 'the remains ... were cleared away' at that time, this does appear to be a generalisation. The site of the cross was shown on most of the OS sheets from 2½ to 1 mile and larger, although it was rather confusingly type-set on some editions. It stood at the north-east vertex of the triangle of buildings, formerly the green, at the centre of the village. Why it was not shown on the First Edition is not clear.

Figure 33: Plaque on the present cross.

The exact position of the earlier cross (at SJ 2535 8721) can be verified by reference to pictorial sources, which show that at least one stone forming the base of the cross remained in place until about 1914. Figure 35, showing a child actually standing on the stone, gives an idea of scale. In 1967, during the second of two road 'improvement' schemes, Greasby Road was re-aligned and the corner was lost.

'Mr Shaw' was John Ralph Nicholson, who became the owner of the family's Greasby estate on 30 December 1829 on the death of his uncle or great-uncle John Shaw. At this time Nicholson was still a minor, presumably until 1837, when he took the surname Shaw (Brownbill 1928, 292). As there is no letter 'J' in the Latin alphabet, he changed his initials to I R S.

At this point it is necessary to consider where the bulk of the stones went when they were 'cleared away'. The Shaw family estate was auctioned in August 1867. It consisted of large tracts of property in Wirral including three farmhouses, several terraced houses, a shop and
a pub, all within approximately 300 yards of the cross. The oldest and most substantial of these properties was Greasby Old Hall with its outbuildings. It is suggested here that this is where the stones were taken.

The large scale plans of the area, from the tithe plan dated 14 March 1849 to the latest revision of the 25" OS sheet, dated 8 June 1989, are quite revealing (Figures 36 and 37). The plan of the Hall itself does not change significantly, but one large outbuilding shown on the tithe plan is not shown on later revisions.

There are, however, three periods during which the number and shape of the outbuildings, lean-to's and sheds change considerably, namely between 1849 and 1874, between 1936 and 1965 and between 1965 and 1989.

The first of these periods covers the time when the remains of the cross were cleared away, and thus it is possible that the stones were available for re-use at that time. The changes in the third period were due to the conversion of the outbuildings into terraced houses, and it is not relevant here.

The second of these periods is most significant, as it was the time when the Greasby by-pass (Frankby Road) was completed in late 1937 (Birkenhead News, 4 September 1937). It runs almost parallel to, and on the north side of Greasby Old Hall. At this time the slip-roads on both sides of the by-pass were also constructed, originally as cycle tracks.

The boundary wall is at SJ 2529 8732, the stones of which were last used as part of a pigsty in the north-west corner of the garden. This was demolished for safety reasons in 1957 and then (or soon after) the wall was built by Mr A.E.W. Wilson, owner and occupier of the Old Hall from 1956 to 1981 (Wilson 1995).

Both the present cross and the stones have been drawn and measured (Figure 38). At some time the wall has been repointed with an excessive amount of mortar, partly obscuring the shape of the stones. If stone 1 was repositioned to lie above stone 3, they would together show an inscribed circle of 330mm diameter on a roughly circular stone of 508mm diameter. The equivalent diameter on the present cross is also 508mm, the height being 2.2m. Without carefully demolishing the whole wall, there seems to be no way to work out accurately the original alignment of the other stones, but an approximation to a height of 2.2m is feasible.

With regard to the date of the carving of the stones, Oakes (1966, 14) states that the design dates from sometime between AD 900 to 1100. Brownbill (1928, 17) discussing the early crosses at West Kirby, suggests a 12th century date.

It should also be noted that there is a similarity between the Greasby stones and the simple cross and circle which can be seen, for example, in some of the inscribed stones at Whitborn and Kirkmadrine in southwest Scotland, in particular the 'Viventius Et Mavorius' stone from Kirkmadrine (Allen and Anderson 1993, 495).

Similar parallels can be found in Wales as Spencer suggests (1997). She cites an identical carving on a vertically-mounted grave slab inside the ruins of St Non's Chapel, near St. Davids to which Nash Williams (1950, 205) gives a date lying between the 7th and 9th centuries AD. The slab was excavated from the surrounding field. Another extremely similar stone stands at Gallarus in the Dingle Peninsula in County Kerry, Ireland (Weir 1980, 47).

Sidebottom (1997, 7) states that less detailed designs do not necessarily indicate a later date, as previously thought. The original theory held that both Anglo-Saxon and later Viking communities both became decadent in their turn and the standard of carving declined, although he does admit the difficulty of independent dating of such carvings. However, in various areas, including Wirral, he concludes that the smaller, more roughly carved monuments in these areas 'merely reflect the lesser wealth of these comparatively marginal communities'. On the other hand, Sidebottom may not be familiar with these particular stones. He begins his article with the words 'Early medieval crosses in England have long been seen as no more than elaborate, decorated gravestones reflecting the 'period fashion' of their day.' which gives some confirmation of Spencer's suggestion.

The local perceived wisdom (Wilson, 1995) is that the stones may have had a religious significance. It is therefore suggested that the first standing village cross in Greasby was derived from an early Christian cross inscribed stone of which these stones are the remains.

It would seem that the statement on the plaque (Figure 34) that the first cross was used as a 'hiring cross' is unlikely. Horn (1995, 45) states that although annual 'hiring' or 'Mop' fairs were common in the 18th century, by the middle of the 19th century they were coming into disrepute, partly because of the 'slave market' atmosphere at such events, and partly due to the accompanying drunkenness. The present cross, therefore, may have only had a short time, if any, as a hiring cross.

The future of these stones seems relatively safe. Greasby Old Hall is a Listed Grade II building and the wall actually forms the northern boundary of the proposed Greasby Conservation Area.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Stella Wilson 1913-1998
Figure 34: Photograph of the stones in the wall on the south side of Frankby Road.

Figure 35: Photograph taken around 1914, the village centre looking west with girl standing on the last piece of the old cross.
Figure 36: Part of the 1849 tithe plan showing the layout of Greasby Old Hall (Cheshire R.O. EDT 171/2 14 March 1849) for comparison with Figure 37.

Figure 37: Greasby Old Hall and its out-buildings in 1965. (Taken from the 50" O.S. map SJ 2587. Reproduced by kind permission of Ordnance Survey © Crown Copyright NC/00/847).
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Figure 38: Sketch of the stones showing measurements taken.