

Whiteleaf Cross

It would be presumptuous to attempt an authoritative account of Whiteleaf Cross; rather, as suggested by Dr. F. G. Parsons in his *Old Records of Monks Risborough*, one should speak of it as an old friend, one whose origins might be obscure, but whose presence is both familiar and comforting.

Familiar though it may be, Whiteleaf Cross remains enigmatic. Carved into the chalk of the Chiltern escarpment, its highest point soars some 300 feet above the vale. It was said by the Rev. Francis Wise, writing in 1738, to be visible from Uffington White Horse Hill, 'which distance if computed upon the strait Ickleway, which runs under both of them, is near thirty miles'. If that were so one might expect its presence, had it been there, to have been noted in earlier records, but Mr. Wise's account, when he was Radcliffe Librarian at Oxford with access to all its treasures, is not only the first, but can do no more speculate on its history.

It may be that the Cross and its approximately triangular base, once called 'The Globe', should be considered as separate entities, not necessarily contemporaneous. Dr. Parsons remarks that until the 17th century Whiteleaf was called White Cliffe, suggesting a natural geological feature. He gives no references, and some doubt may be cast on this by a recently discovered letter of 1685. Written to 'Brother and Sister Balldin', perhaps members of the local Baptist congregation, its address appears at first sight to be Whitleffe, but on closer inspection to be Whiteleffe. Was the cross added to such a feature, perhaps as a pair to that other cross, similar in dimension, that exists, though scarcely visible today, below the Chiltern scarp at Bledlow? That, too, is shrouded in mystery; the only reliable date for it is given by Robert Gibbs, in his *Bucks Miscellany* of 1891, quoting a tenant farmer as having stumbled on it by chance in about 1810.

Perhaps, as Dr. Parsons suggested, we should not trouble the Cross with impertinent questions, but leave it in peace in its beautiful and certainly ancient landscape. It looks down with equal favour on Monks Risborough, which may justly claim it as its own, and on the small market town of Princes Risborough: and from them we, in turn, may lift our eyes to the hills and draw strength from its presence.

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