

THE HISTORY OF ILAM CROSS

By Philip Mottram

One of the best ways to arrive at the picturesque Staffordshire village of Ilam, is to come down the steep hill from Blore. After an exhilarating view of the Manifold Valley and the entrance to Dovedale from the open, twisting road down Blore Pastures, the lane narrows between hedges before turning sharp left over the river bridge at the entrance of the village.

The delightful ‘surprise view’ which greets one just beyond the bridge owes much of its beauty to a handsome memorial cross in the foreground. Its design is based on the Eleanor Crosses, with which Edward I marked the stopping places on the last journey of his queen, Eleanor of Castile, from Nottinghamshire to Westminster Abbey in London, after her death in 1290. Indeed the sorry state of Ilam Cross might lead one to think that it too was over 700 years old. But in fact it is only just over 150 years since it was set up by another grieving husband, Jesse Watts-Russell of Ilam Hall.

Jesse’s father, Jesse Russell Sen., was a prosperous businessman, who made a fortune in London - in the first place as a soap manufacturer when washing was coming into fashion and later as a successful investor in the City exchanges. In the conventional phrase he became ‘one of the richest men in England’, though retaining the careful habits of a self-made man. He did however spend freely on his eldest son, sending him to Eton and Worcester College, Oxford - an important connection for Ilam Cross - and buying the Ilam Estate for him in 1809, as a family home on his engagement to Mary Watts.

Jesse Russell jun.’s fiancée was the heiress of David Pike Watts, a brewer and vintner of London, also a fabulously rich man. Jesse and Mary were married in 1811 and, shortly after, made Ilam their principal country home. David’s two sons having died in the Napoleonic Wars, Mary was his sole heiress and, when her father died in 1816, Jesse Russell took the additional name of Watts to continue the name. Mary Watts-Russell commissioned the memorial to her father, which is such a magnificent feature of the church at Ilam, from the greatest English sculptor of his day, Francis Chantrey, another important contact in the history of Ilam Cross. Jesse Watts-Russell and Mary started a family and, by 1840, had produced eight children when the family was plunged into grief by Mary’s death at the early age of 48.

The bereavement came at the end of a period during which Jesse had radically changed the appearance of Ilam. The old Ilam Hall of the Port family had been demolished and a new home, designed by John Shaw in the ‘Baronial Splendour’ style, finished in 1827. In the same year the building of an imposing new vicarage was started. At the time of Mary’s death, the scheme of model cottages which is such a feature of Ilam scenery, was just being finished and they had almost certainly been designed by George Gilbert Scott, who was also the architect for an ongoing, thorough restoration of St. Mary’s Church in Stafford, substantially funded by Jesse Watts-Russell. Scott also became an important contact in the story of Ilam Cross.

It would be easy to look on Ilam Cross as a beautiful and interesting, though not particularly significant, local curiosity. In fact it illustrates the way major national movements and events can impinge on a small village as remote as Ilam in the middle of the nineteenth century, when bitter controversy raged in the Church of England. As the relations between Church and State were in turmoil, the Church itself was also rent by discord.

A group of men centred on Oxford came to believe that, during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, changes in the liturgy and the arrangement of churches, designed to distance the Church of England from the influence of Roman Catholicism, had gone too far and should be undone. Richard Hurrell Froude, in his published "*Remains*", even went so far as to suggest that 'the Reformation was a limb badly set, it must be broken again in order to be righted.' A group of like minded, would-be reformers became known as The Oxford Movement. Among them were John Keble (after whom Keble College, Oxford was named), Edward Bouverie Pusey and John Henry Newman. It was Newman who later confirmed many people's suspicions that the Oxford Movement was counter-reformation, by going over to the Church of Rome and being consecrated as Cardinal by the Pope. This group issued a series of pamphlets entitled '*Tracts for Our Times*', calling for a return to such 'Roman' ideas as the use of statues, candles, incense, ornate vestments and the reintroduction of a more Catholic Eucharist. These controversial publications earned them the name of 'Tractarians', and their perceived closeness to Rome labelled them 'Anglo-Catholics'.

Many people in the Church of England, both clergy and laity, were horrified by what they saw as this affront to their Protestant heritage and sought ways to symbolise their determination to resist a drift back towards Rome. They wanted also to remind forgetful members of the Church of the martyrdom of Anglicans, who died for their refusal to abandon the Reformation. They proposed to erect a memorial to three Protestant leaders, Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer, who were burnt at the stake as heretics, in Oxford in 1555/56, after Queen Mary set about restoring the Catholic faith as the state religion of England.

In November 1838, the opponents of the Tractarians set up a working group, the Martyrs' Memorial Committee, to conduct a public appeal and to make arrangements for a suitable public memorial in the centre of Oxford, as a warning of the dangers of neo-Catholicism. In December Jesse Watts-Russell contributed generously to the appeal. Of the hundreds of donations listed in the subscription book, his donation was one of only seven of £50, a figure exceeded only by three others. So he had taken a close interest in the Oxford Cross nearly two years before Mary's death.

By March 1840, it had been decided that part of the Martyrs' Memorial should take the form of an Eleanor cross, based on that at Waltham, and a private competition was held to select an architect/designer. Mary Watts-Russell died in the following August, when preparations for the Oxford Cross were well advanced, the foundation stone eventually being laid on 19th May 1841.

Jesse Watts-Russell's connections with the people erecting the Martyrs' memorial were close. He was, of course, an old Oxonian himself. From the designs submitted to the competition, the winning design was that by Jesse's friend and collaborator in the transformation of Ilam, George Gilbert Scott. [Plate 1A] Sir Francis Chantrey, also a close friend, having not only created one of his greatest masterpieces for Ilam Church but also having advised on much of the redevelopment of Ilam, was consulted about the sculpture of the three figures of the Martyrs. But not being able to undertake the work himself, he agreed that his principal assistant Henry Weekes should do the carving under his supervision. Chantrey's part in the project sadly came to an end when he died on 25 November 1841.

This was the background against which Jesse Watts-Russell considered what would be the most appropriate design for a village memorial to his wife Mary. He decided to adopt the

Eleanor Cross model with the addition of a spring of pure water for the villagers. This idea was probably suggested by the fact that the surviving Eleanor Cross at Geddington, not far from Jesse's other estate near Oundle, has a spring incorporated in its base. He was clearly in close touch with George Gilbert Scott at the time and chose as architect John Macduff Derick, an Oxford architect whose design for the Martyrs' Memorial, had not been chosen. Perhaps he wanted to give Derick a consolation prize and almost certainly commissioned a design from him in consultation with Scott. Indeed, the pinnacle of the cross at Ilam (now sadly destroyed) was closely modelled on that of the Martyrs' memorial, so Derick must have been familiar with Scott's design. Derick's design for Ilam was however significantly different from his rejected design for Oxford [Plate 1B.], probably indicating a sensitivity to location and, perhaps, respect for Jesse's personal taste.

The Oxford Cross took until the spring of 1843 to complete, though the inscription is dated to the laying of the foundation stone in 1841. [Plate 1A.] It is constructed mainly of magnesian limestone. Scott did not like the stone from the famous quarry at Mansfield Woodhouse in Nottinghamshire, from which the stone for the new Houses of Parliament was taken, but found a material he preferred in a nearby disused quarry.^{A/ 1} However, the statues of the three martyrs were carved by Weekes in oolitic Caen stone from France, blocks of which were obtained from the stock held by Canterbury Cathedral, through the initiative of Dr. William Buckland, the famous geologist and Dean of Westminster, who was an extremely influential member of the Martyrs' Memorial Committee. ^BThis choice of material turned out to be unfortunate, since the stone did not weather well in Oxford, even though the statues are sheltered by the deep niches in which they stand. ^C[Plate 3B]

On Ilam Cross there are six statues of angels and a 'Topographical Dictionary' of 1849 ^Dtells us that they were 'carved by Richard Westmacott in Caen stone'. As far back as 1816, when David Pike Watts died, Sir Richard Westmacott R.A. (1755 - 1856) wrote to John Constable, Mary Watts-Russell's first cousin, to ask who were David's executors. So he was probably touting for business then, though it was Chantrey who got the commission for the memorial to David Pike Watts in Ilam Church. Perhaps the stock at Canterbury Cathedral, in addition to the Caen stone supplied for the figures on the Oxford memorial, may have also been the source of the stone for the angels on Ilam Cross.

Sir Richard had also reported on the state of the figures of Queen Eleanor on the Waltham Cross, to a committee undertaking its restoration in 1834, and eventually undertook partial restoration of one of the figures. But by 1841, he was right at the end of his working career, which was said to have been second in success only to Chantrey's. His son, also Richard (1799 - 1872), was then taking over his father's practice and the fact that the reference is not to 'Sir' Richard, seems to indicate that the work on the angels is by the son. Since Chantrey had already passed the work on the figures for the Martyrs' Memorial to his assistant, Weekes, he was not a candidate for the work at Ilam and Jesse turned to Westmacott. [Plate 2B] A local guide to Ilam, published in 1841 ^E, announced that a monument to Mrs Watts-Russell 'is now being erected in the village', which means that the decisions about the Ilam cross and its figures had been taken speedily.

At Ilam, the choice of stones was doubly disastrous The basins for the spring water and the first four courses of stone are constructed of a local triassic material, probably from a quarry a few miles away at Stanton, a sandstone cemented with barite. The same stone was used for

Jesse's new hall, the new vicarage, the road bridge, St. Bertram's Bridge and the mullions of the model cottages. This excellent freestone has stood the test of time well. But the main structure of the cross is entirely of a variety of Cotswold stone, possibly from near the famous quarry at Doulling in Somerset. The use of Caen stone for the figures compounds the problem, since both of these oolitic limestones have proved to be seriously affected by weathering.

Three of the surviving figures of Queen Eleanor on Waltham Cross [Plate 3C.], the model for both the Oxford and Ilam crosses, have been replaced by replicas and the originals deposited on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. One of them is on display in a favoured position in a main gallery of the Museum. It is a great irony that, after more than 700 years, it is in a better state than some of the figures on both the Oxford and Ilam Crosses. The irony is accentuated by the fact that, as the original medieval accounts for the work on the figures on Waltham Cross confirm, it is also carved in Caen stone. Close inspection shows the material to be much more dense and made up of much smaller oolites - rolled limestone pellets - than that at Ilam. Perhaps, at Caen, stone of such high quality was worked out in the middle ages and, by the middle of the nineteenth century, only coarser grained stone of poorer quality was available, or perhaps cheap enough. It may also be the case that, since the industrial revolution, acid rain has made atmospheric erosion much more searching and destructive, though this would not explain why Waltham Cross fared so much better.

By September 1841, *The Sheffield Mercury* reported G:-

'ILAM CROSS . - An exceedingly beautiful stone cross has just been erected in the centre of the little village of Ilam, in Staffordshire, by J. W. Russell, Esq., of Ilam Hall, in memory of his late wife. In general design, this exquisite and appropriate structure may, perhaps, be said to bear some resemblance to the established Eleanor Cross, near Waltham Abbey. It is forty feet in height, terminating in a very light and graceful ornamental cross: the arrangement and execution of the tabernacle-work on the body of the monument are as tasteful and delicate as can well be conceived by those who have examined ancient specimens of this kind of carving. The material is the fine white limestone of Boyborough 2, near Bath, and the architect Mr. Derrick [sic], of Oxford. It is well known that [in] the mausoleum attached to the church of Ilam, is Chantrey's most celebrated work, representiog [sic] the late - Russell, Esq., [sic - i.e. David Pike Watts] on his death couch, giving the paternal benediction to his daughter, and three of her children[.] - with this far famed and affecting work of art - itself the object of many pilgrimage to Ilam, will henceforth be associated in the remembrance of the visitor, or the description of the Tourist - the village cross - the elegant, and it is to be hoped, long enduring monument of that same excellent woman, who forms, with one exception, the principal figure of Chantrey's impressive group.'

The fact that the design could be commissioned, the sculpture ordered, the masonry and carving completed and the whole structure erected in just thirteen months, is a remarkable tribute to Jesse Watts-Russell's decisiveness. The feat is even more remarkable when one takes into account the engineering of the water supply to the spring.

The source of the water for the basins posed something of a problem. There are references to cholera in the village in 1834 but Jesse could not have known of the link between contaminated water and the disease, since this connection was not established until Dr. John Snow made proved it in London in 1854. But he hardly needed to know that pure spring water from the limestone hills (which today would be bottled and sold at a large premium)

was more wholesome. There are springs in the village, but most are below the level of the houses and, therefore, at risk of contamination, if only by mud or objectionable smells in the days of outdoor privies.

So Jesse decided to tap a source at the foot of Bunster Hill, half a mile from the village. Here there was a pure natural spring, but the outfall required improvement. A short tunnel was made, using explosives for which drilling holes can still be seen, to clear the mouth of the spring and to cut a small basin in the rock. The water was piped across Hainley field to the spur of Bunster just outside the village, where a cistern was installed to provide the header tank. From there the pipe led down to the Cross. It was obviously an important resource for the villagers and there is a later photograph of a farm-hand using a bucket to fill a horse-drawn water cart from one of the basins. [Plate 2D.]

It was left to the 1850 edition of Hobson's Hguide to complete the account of the monument:-

'Near the centre [of Ilam] is a gothic cross of stone erected by Mr. Watts-Russell, to perpetuate the memory of his first wife. It is in the style of the "Waltham Cross," elaborately carved, and enriched with statues of exquisite beauty. At the foot of the cross flows a fountain, which supplies the villagers with water. An inscription tells her virtues to whom the cross is raised, and in allusion to the fountain, adds,

"This Cross and Fountain,

erected by her husband,

perpetuate the memory of

One who lives in the hearts of

so many in this village and neighbourhood.

MARY WATTS-RUSSELL

MDCCCXL."

"Free for all these crystal waters flow,

Her gentle eyes could weep for others' woe;

Dried is that fount; but long may this endure,

To be a Well of Comfort to the Poor."

The historical background to the erection of Ilam Cross; its connection with the religious (and therefore political) controversies of its day; its symbolic connection to the Martyrs' Memorial, implying Jesse Watts-Russell's opposition to the Tractarian movement; its stylistic relation

to Eleanor Crosses; the influence of George Gilbert Scott, Sir Francis Chantrey and Sir Richard Westmacott and his son; its progressive social hygiene and its elegant sentimental symbolism - make it a monument of far greater significance than a merely local memorial. Its preservation as a major work of Art and an important symbol of a particular time and place is extremely important.

Unfortunately, the deterioration of the 'Boyborough' and Caen stones has seriously affected the Ilam Cross. Its state can only be described as sorry. Apart from the near total loss of the inscription, originally in red and black letters, all the rest of the detail is sadly eroded. The statues, which are much more exposed than those on the Oxford Memorial, are in an advanced, even dangerous, state of decay. [Plate 3D] One has lost its head completely. The basic structure seems to be reasonably sound, but the gradual, continuous erosion of the decoration bids fair to remove a great deal of its heritage value as a supreme example of the best of Gothic Revival architecture and the art of the middle of the nineteenth century.

In the late nineteen-sixties, the weakened summit cross was blown down in a freak storm. At the time, the late Mr Wendell Holmes tried to raise money for its full restoration. Unfortunately, in the financial climate of the times, he was only able to afford a simplified cross, made of Stanton stone in the 'Municipal Cemetery' style, to replace the damaged section. [Plate 3A.] At the time he intended it only as a temporary repair, until such times as it became possible to restore the cross properly.

The present replacement disfigures the design, negating Scott's and Derick's close attention to authentic Gothic forms. The original was designed when Pugin's campaign for the revival of true Gothic style was reaching its maturity in his work on the interior detail of the new House of Commons, and it seems certain that all three would have been horrified by the present stopgap arrangements. The original finial was closely similar to that on the Martyrs' Memorial in Oxford, which constitutes an important stylistic link to that other important, contemporary use of the iconography of the Eleanor Cross. Jesse Watts-Russell later went on to use Derick for ecclesiastical work at Oundle and Benefield, clearly respecting his ability. What Jesse would have had to say about the state of his wife's memorial does not bear thinking about.

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