

Distribution of Monuments

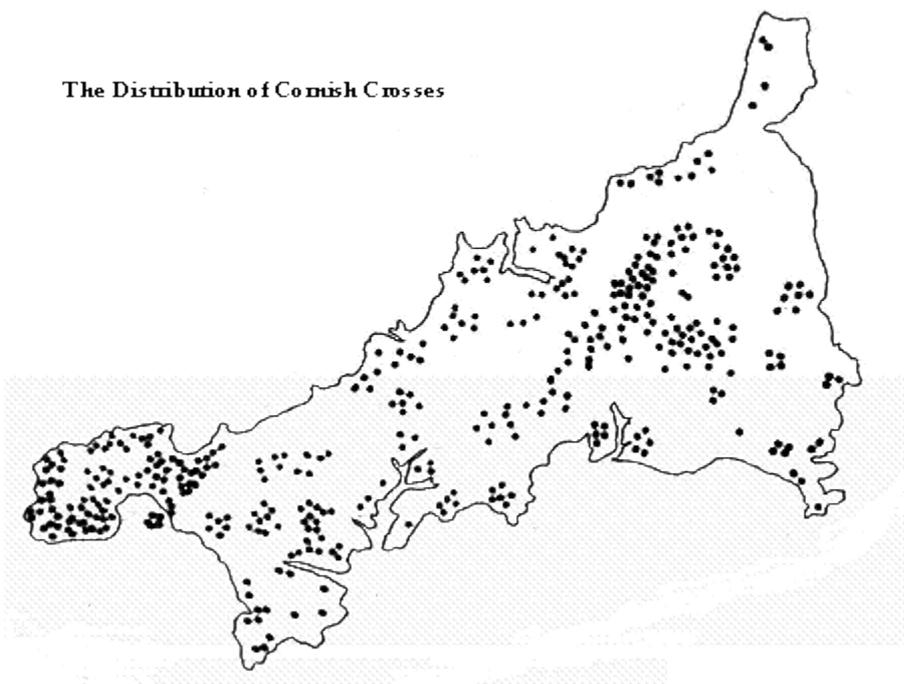
Almost ninety percent of the stone crosses in Cornwall are cut from surface moorland granite, and it is therefore not surprising to find that the majority of these monuments are to be found in the moorland areas. The west Penwith moors and Bodmin Moor have the largest concentration of crosses, with smaller accumulations around the Wendron moors. Another reason for large numbers of crosses in certain areas was undoubtedly due to the presence of important religious settlements during the medieval period, such as at St Buryan and Bodmin.

The eastern side of the county, including the parishes bordering the Tamar valley has few crosses. This area, together with the south-east of Cornwall displays crosses of a much later date. Most are gothic and display either cross-shafts with chamfers or are octagonal in section. Wheel-headed crosses depicting figures of Christ are found almost exclusively in west Cornwall, although a few have been removed to other parts of the county.

Several groups of crosses are found around the two main estuaries on the north coast, the rivers Hayle and Camel. Perhaps this again is partly due to the early Christian settlements founded by missionaries from both Wales and Ireland.

The writer considers that many wayside crosses may have been lost during the early years of Cornwall's industrial revolution, especially in the china clay area where large areas of moorland were excavated.

The Distribution of Cornish Crosses



Discovering Cornish Crosses

During the past twenty years a number of wayside crosses have been discovered throughout the county. Most of these have been found buried head down in the ground, in use as gateposts, or built into hedges. Some have been exposed when field entrances have been widened to receive larger modern farm machinery, while others have been found when

gateposts have been damaged. In 1993, at Constantine parish a wheel-headed cross was discovered due to the erosion of a hedge by cattle and in 1991 a cross-head was found buried in the bottom of a garden hedge at Lanivet. Further crosses have been discovered in use as gateposts at Lanlivery 1990, Camborne 1988, St Neot 1999 and St Clether 2002.

The ingenuity of the Cornish to adapt these medieval Christian relics to more mundane secular purposes appears to have been almost unlimited. A redundant wayside cross was simply a handy piece of stone to a local farmer and they have been adopted as gateposts, footbridges across mill leats and streams, lintels for fireplaces, door jambs etc. Some were put to more unusual uses for example, as a support for a bee hive, to form a pivot for a horse-drawn threshing machine and their heads even hollowed out for use as pig troughs.

The base stones were usually of little use to the landowner, as they were normally large boulders of granite with a mortice cut either straight through or part-way through the stone. Due to their weight these cross bases were not normally moved a great distance but usually pushed up against the nearest hedge and abandoned. Several are built into the foot of a hedge with their mortice exposed to view; examples can be seen at Trungle in Paul, Heamoor in Madron and Teason in Cardinham. Therefore, if you find an old cross base, in most cases you can be reasonably sure that you are near the site of an ancient cross, marking an ancient track or boundary.

Today the discovery of a churchyard cross is rare, but during the Victorian period of church restoration several were discovered built into the fabric of the churches. Also during the Victorian era, churchyard crosses were sometimes unearthed by the parish sexton whilst grave digging. Today most churchyards are closed to burials so the likelihood of a cross being discovered is more remote. So where do we look? The writer always examines gateposts and stiles whilst out walking and has been rewarded on more than one occasion, but it is actually the case that most new discoveries are made by accident - even though documentary evidence to support their positions may be found retrospectively. Field names can also be a clue to discovery: examination of the Tithe Apportionment maps and schedules reveals many field names suggesting a possible cross, such as Parc an Grouse - Cornish for 'Field of the Cross'. Estate maps are also a good source for potential cross sites. The writer believes there are still more ancient crosses to be found in the Cornish countryside.