

THE CLWYD-POWYS ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST

Whitford Church, Flintshire

The Inscribed and Decorated Stones



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Report for Diocese of St Asaph

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The Inscribed and Decorated Stones in Whitford Church

This brief statement on the stones housed in St Beuno and St Mary's Church at Whitford repeats much that was published both by Ellis Davies in 1923 and again in 1952/3 and by other commentators, and simply attempts to quantify the collection of stones that are currently stored in the church. It has been prepared as a result of concerns being expressed in early 2006 about the current state of those stones and the potential for further damage occurring to them in their present position.

The collection is a heterogeneous one, comprising material from the early medieval through to the 17th century. One of the stones, the *Nobilis* stone is scheduled, indicating its national importance. The collection of medieval sepulchral slab fragments is one of the better groups in the diocese, and the sundial also appears to be unusual, although in the absence of a comparative study accessible to the writer, this cannot be confirmed.

All the stones currently reside at the west end of the south aisle, but there is also a small display case in the north aisle of the church which contains smaller artefacts.

Early Medieval

1) Inscribed stone. This originally stood at Plas-yn-Rhos, Caerwys parish, from where it was reputedly moved to Downing by David Pennant early in the 19th century, although Ellis Davies thought in 1923 that it was in fact Thomas Pennant who moved it, and this is repeated on a notice in the church. In 1923 Mr Parry Jones, the then owner of Downing felt that both the stone and the sarcophagus (see below) might be moved to Whitford church at some point in the immediate future, and it was finally donated to the church by a Mr. J. H. in 1936, where it was cemented into its present position 'with the sanction of His Majesty's Office of Works'. The inscription on the stone faces towards the west window, and away from the visitor approaching from the church entrance.

The maximum height of the stone is 1.28m, its width 0.80m and the depth about 0.39m. The inscription runs: *HIC IACIT MULIER BONA NOBILI* (Here lies the good wife [or BONA wife] of Nobilis). Date: 6th century (Davies E, 1952-3, 39).



2) Stone with incised cross. This according to the Rev. Elias Owen (*Old stone crosses of the Vale of Clwyd*, 1886, p. 195) was discovered a few years before 1886, about 20 yards from the wall of the church in the north part of the churchyard. It was six feet deep in the ground, and lying upon it was a silver coin said to belong to the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Its date was reputedly in the 10th or 11th century, and Dr Nancy Edwards has confirmed this, comparing it with similar cross-slabs at Llangaffo, Llangainwen and Llanfihangel Ysgeifiog on Anglesey (N. Edwards: *pers. comm.*).

The incised cross - a "Cross Potent," that is, having transverse arms at the extremities of the main arms and just above the spiked foot - is 3 ft. long according to Davies. Until 1951 the stone lay outside the church, close to the north wall, now it is inside at the west end of the south aisle (Davies E, 1952-3, 41).

The stone is 1.90m long, 0.52m wide and 0.44m deep, and the surface with the cross is slightly convex. There is more damage to the surface than depicted in the drawing made by Owen (*below*).



Medieval

3) Sarcophagus. Stone coffin in the Downing grounds till 1936 was brought by David Pennant from Faenol Fawr near Bodelwyddan and Kinnel, to Downing after 1808. It was noted by Richard Fenton during one of his tours at the beginning of the 19th century (Fisher 1917, 149) and was said to have come from a field called Caercelyn where ground irregularities suggested an enclosure of about half an acre which it was thought might have been the site of a chapel. In medieval times it had apparently occupied a recess in a wall at Faenol, a chapel of ease to St. Asaph, one of three such chapels that Thomas Pennant recorded as dependent on St Asaph (Pennant vol III, 155).

Ellis Davies in 1923 noted that there was a field called Cae Clenen (= field of the holly tree) just to the south of the house at Faenol, but there were no obvious earthworks there.

It is 2.04m long, 0.75m wide and 0.56m deep, and has no lid; the thickness of the stone varies up to 0.10m. The interior narrows at the 'top' to take the deceased's head. The front is covered with carving consisting of eight pointed (straight-sided) arches with cusps and crockets, between which

above are small plain shields; the remaining sides are plain. On the rim an incomplete inscription in Lombardic letters, now very indistinct: HIC JACET ROBERT, first seen by Fenton. Its date is 14th century or possibly 15th. The coffin has undergone restoration, and only a little over half the front is original, with the whole of the bottom of the side renewed.

It was presented to Whitford Church in 1936 by the Darwen and Mostyn Iron Company.

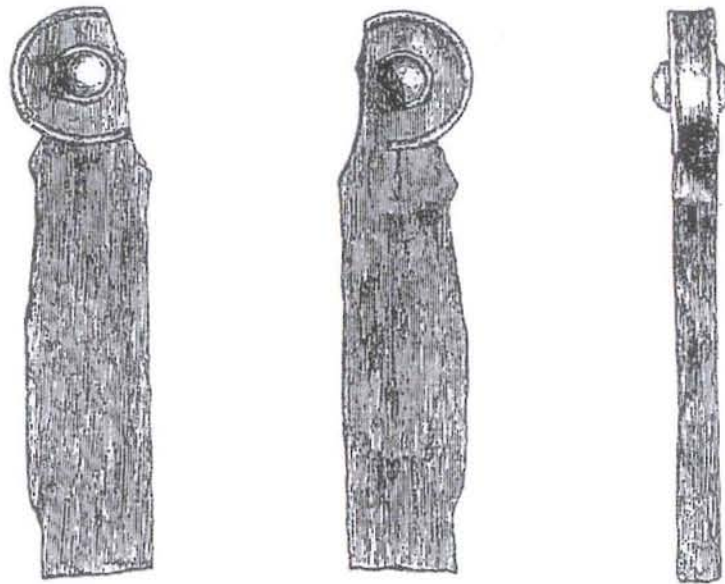


4) There is also a **fragment of stone** with identical ornament that was found at Faenol and presented to Whitford (Davies 1952-3, 40). Davies thought, probably correctly, that it might have been a missing part of the original sarcophagus which had broken off and then been replaced in more modern material by 1923. It's maximum dimensions are 0.47m by 0.28m and it is 0.10m thick.

5) A **free standing cross** with a disc head (diameter 0.36m) surrounded by a bead moulding bearing a central raised boss on either side, but no other ornament. According to Elias Owen it was discovered embedded in the east wall of the church when it was undergoing restoration in 1845. He states that it was 5 feet long then. Now it is only about half that length. Part of the circular head had been broken off, and one of the bosses was damaged, as well as the stem. The date, Ellis thought, should be 10th to 11th-century. It may have served as a churchyard cross, as did the similar but decorated example Dyserth, now inside the church. (Davies E, 1952-3, 40).

Current thinking favours a full medieval date for it.

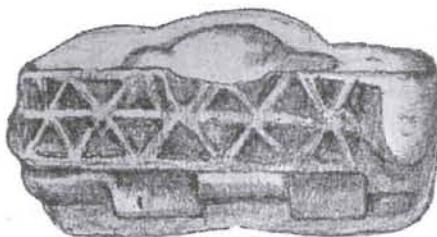
It dimensions are 0.79m high, 0.29m wide and 0.13m thick.



A free standing cross as drawn by Elias Owen

6) Piscina This is mentioned but not described by Ellis Davies (1952-3, 40). There is a lobate bowl, and decoration has been carved onto two sides: the front, and the side left of front, which are right-angled between them. Maximum dimensions are 0.47m by 0.39m and the height is 0.17m.

The decoration is broadly comparable with the displaced lintels in the Brecknock churches of Llanfilo and Llanddew, which are dated to the beginning of the 12th century, and other carved stones in south Wales and the borders (Thurlby 2006, 58).



7) **Piscina.** Again this is mentioned but not described by Ellis Davies (1952-3, 40). It is of similar size to no.6 – 0.46m by 0.39m by 0.16m, but has a plain bowl, with its edge broken off. It has very similar decoration, but with a slightly more curvilinear appearance and on one side only.



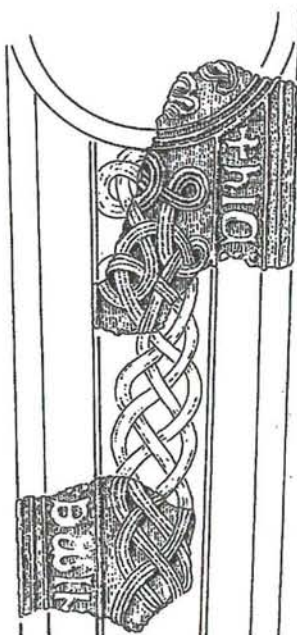
8) **Stone head of a man** This is generally considered to be a corbel. Its dimensions are 0.33m by 0.19m and it is 0.16m deep (Davies E, 1952-3, 40).

9) **Quern** The lower stone from a small rotary quern found in 1918 by Mr. Thomas Hughes, of Pistyll, below the depth of the plough, in a field near Glanrafon in Whitford (Davies E, 1952-3, 41). are 0.26m by 0.22m and it is 0.16m deep.

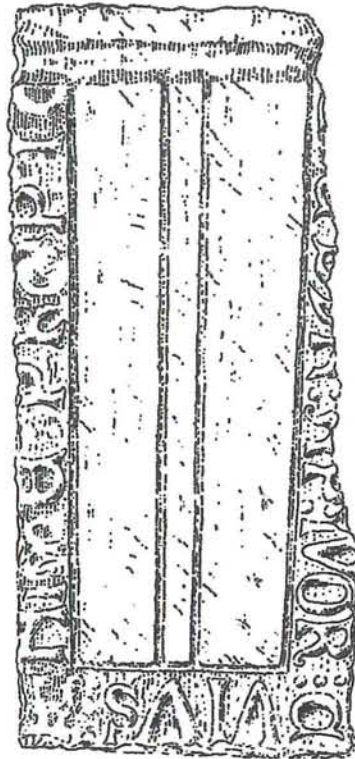
Medieval Sepulchral Slabs

Thomas (1911, 205) referred to fragments of several 14th-century floriated crosses and the old stoup for holy water, all under the tower.

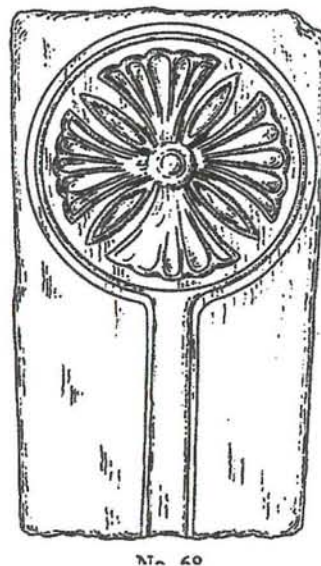
10 & 11) Gresham 31 (1968, 84 + fig 35) Two fragments from the same slab of late 13th-century date.



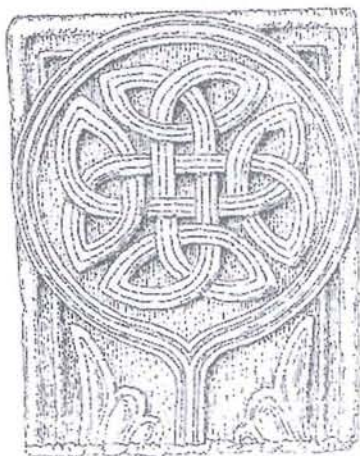
12) Gresham 42 (1968, 91 + fig 38) The inscribed slab for Bleddyn ab Ifor who, it is claimed was referred to as Vicar of Whitford in a separate document of 1306, although confusingly the appellation was to Ifor ap Bleddyn (*Archaeologia Cambrensis* 1868, 438). Dated to the early 14th century. 3' 4" by 1' 5" by 6".



13) Gresham 68 (1968, 109 + fig 46). Floriated cross of the early 14th century. 2' 7" by 1' 4.5" to 1' 6" by 6".



14) Gresham 71 (1968, 111 + fig 47). Interlaced cross of the early 14th century. 2' 4.5" by 1' 2" to 1' 0" by 6". This was found when the church was rebuilt in 1847 and subsequently fixed against the south wall of the porch on the east side of the inner door. It is now with the other stones at the west end of the south aisle.



15) Gresham 134 (1968, 150 + fig 64). A decorated slab for Gruffydd ap Dafydd from the early 14th century. 1' 8" by 1' 2" by 7".



16) Gresham 202 (1968, 220 + fig 89). Decorated slab for Eva ferch Iohannes ap Madog of the late 14th century. 11.5" by 10" to 11.5" by 2".



17) A small fragment with lettering, seemingly of medieval form, and some limited, sunken decoration. It is similar to, but probably not from the same slab, as no. 16.

Post Medieval Stones

18) **Sun Dial.** Stone is 2 ft. 8 in. by 2 ft. 3 in. The latitude of Whitford is marked on it as "Lat. 53, 15 de 9.00" The gnomon is missing. Dated to the 17th century. Found when the church was undergoing restoration by a Mr Ewan Christian (*Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 1891, 136). It is 0.87m by 0.69m and is 0.5m thick.

Inscribed on it is the Welsh couplet:

*GWEL DDYN MEWN GWIWLAN DDEUNYDD
MAE FFO HEB DARIO MAE YR DYDD.*

(See O man in fair material
That without tarrying flies the day).

(Davies E, 1952-3, 40).



19 A 17th-century mural tablet. The deceased died in 1658.

Other fragments

20) An architect rural fragment with a semi-circular concavity and dog-tooth-like ornament. ?Medieval. Its dimensions are 0.38m by 0.28m by 0.12m.

21) Architectural fragment with deep linear grooves on five of the six sides. Origin and purpose uncertain. Dimensions are 0.16m by 0.14m by 0.11m.

Location

All of the stones recorded here lie at the rear of the south aisle of the church. One is cemented into the floor (no 1), six rest on decking (nos 2, 3, 5, 1, 13 & 14), no 3 because of its greater weight with an extra layer of decking, two on the bench beside the decking (nos 15 & 16), two rest on the slab floor of the aisle (nos 4 & 19), several are piled indiscriminately on top of each other (nos 6, 7, 9, 10, 17, 20 & 21), two lie in the sarcophagus (nos 8 & 17) and one lies against the south wall (no. 18).

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