# The Cross at Willoughby and the nearby Cross Hill

## David Bailey

Willoughby in the late eighteenth-century was described by John Throsby as:-

> A village consisting of about 70 dwellings, mostly in a long street, shaded on each side by trees. Here is a cross with a long shaft, plain and without any inscription thereon.

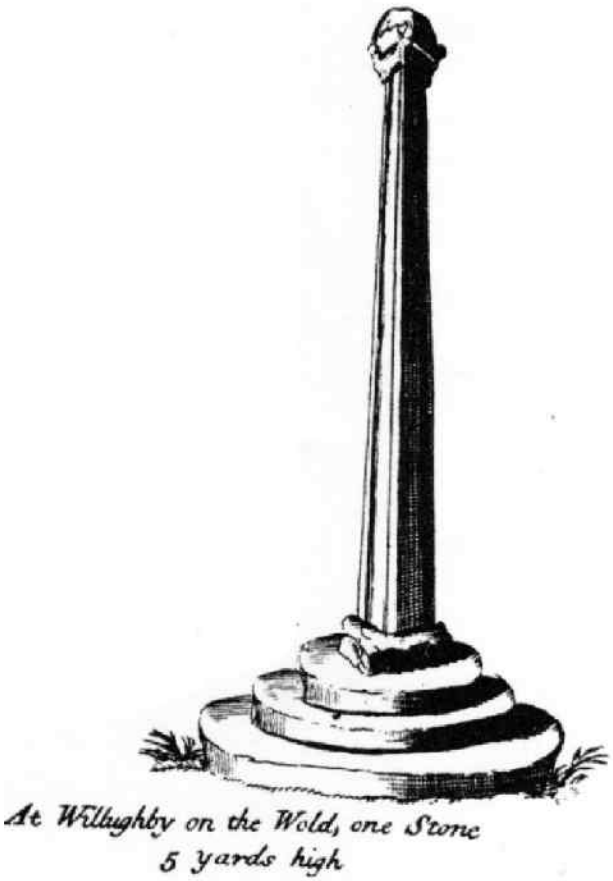
The stone cross stood on the corner at the junction of Widmerpool Lane and Main Street (east) and would have been a landmark in the village. I was first aware of its existence in the 1940s, when I noted that villagers referred to this junction as 'the cross' and my aunt told me that a cross once stood there, but was taken down and left under a hedge when Mount Farm was built in the nineteenth century.

*Mount Farm (left) at the junction of Widmerpool Lane and Main Street (east)* circa *1920.*

Much has been written about it by historians and publishers of gazetteers and directories in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The earliest reference was made by William Stukeley (1687–1765). He was an antiquarian, physician and Anglican clergyman, with a keen interest in the study of antiquities throughout the British Isles. He visited Willoughby in 1722 during his travels round the country and noted:-

> In Willoughby town is a handsome cross of one stone five yards long. The shaft is square throughout, tapering and wrought at the angles with projecting square pillarlets. At the apex it is surmounted by an almost spherical capital with a square moulding. This was clearly original work and the whole erection was perfect except for the loss of the small cross which once crowned it.

His work was published in 1726 and included a hand-drawn image of the cross, which is believed to be the only image of the Willoughby cross to have been published.




*The cross at Willoughby drawn by William Stukeley in 1722. Stukely noted that the Willoughby cross was similar to the one at Upper Broughton.*

The origin of the cross is not known. In 1893 historian William Stevenson suggested that it could have been a 'Queen Eleanor' cross. They were erected at resting places along the route of the procession carrying her coffin between Lincoln and London. Eleanor of Castile was the wife of Edward 1 and the crosses were erected between 1291 and 1294.

More probably it testifies to the Lords of the Manor having at one time been privileged to hold a fair there.

According to Stukeley, during the Civil War 'pious soldiers of Cromwell' tied ropes round the cross in order to pull it down. After 'some strong beer' and a long speech by the vicar it was allowed to remain. This event was referred to by most writers, including Stukeley, who called the Civil War 'the reforming rebellion'.

> There has been much debate about the date that the cross was taken down. The directory of 1832 gives the impression that it was still standing whereas the 1844 directory states that 'it was taken down twenty years ago.' This was confirmed by the 1853 edition which states thirty years. Further evidence is given by Alfred Stapleton who transcribes a letter written by the vicar in 1884:-
>
> I have made inquiries respecting Willoughby Cross. I think about 1819 or 1820 would be the date when it was destroyed. An old man, aged 84, who came to Willoughby in 1813, is pretty sure that it was about six years afterwards and his wife, aged 81, is under the same impression. I cannot learn of any remains of it in existence except the top of the pedestal, which lies on the roadside, a few yards from where the cross stood.

About 1820 seems to be the date when the cross was taken down and the building of Mount Farm commenced. Not all of the cross was removed, however. The base and fragments of the shaft remained. On a visit to Willoughby with the Thoroton Society in 1902, Rev Baylay confirms that this was still visible at the corner of Widmerpool Lane.

*Widmerpool Lane and Main Street (east) in Jamuary 2022 with Cross Hill on the left.*

Mount Farm survived until the late twentieth-century when it was demolished and replaced with a development of houses named Cross Hill.

The name Cross Hill was originally that of a tumulus (a prehistoric burial mound or barrow) that lay close to the junction of the lane from Willoughby to Upper Broughton and the Fosse Way. This crossroads is adjacent to the site of the Roman settlement of Vernemetum. Although the extent and configuration of the settlement have never been fully investiaged, sufficient coins, pottery sherds and crop marks have been discovered to make its location certain.

The tumulus was noted by Stukeley on his arrival at Willoughby in 1722. He described it as:-

> … famous among the country people; it is called Cross hill; upon this they have an anniversary festival.

Stukeley had travelled along the Fosse Way from Newark visiting the sites of the Roman small towns before arriving at the cross-road east of Willoughby. There he found the tumulus in the open field on the Willoughby side. The name of the field was 'Hening' or 'Black Field' due to the colour of the soil. Roman settlements sites are often first discovered because the soil is very dark from hummic matter and charcoal.

*O.S. map surveyed in 1883 showing the Cross Hill tumulus (shaded red in this image). Redcow Farm is now Nottingham Raceway Karting.*

The Rev Baylay, on his visit to Willoughby in 1902, confirmed that the tumulus was marked on the Ordnance Survey map. He also reported that seventy years earlier villagers had ransacked the site in search of treasure but were unsuccessful.

The site at Cross Hill was excavated by archaeologists from the University of Nottingham in 1948. I remember visiting the event and seeing skeletal remains clearly visible from the road. In 1951 an article was published in the Annual Report of the Peverel Archaeological Group titled 'Crosshill Tumulus Excavation'. This states that the site 'is probably a medieval gallows mound (with casual interments associated with it) which overlay structures forming part of the Roman settlement of Vernemetum'.

## Sources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www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=319553&resourceID=19191

**Update**

After the initial version of this article was published Tony Cox made contact with the WHO to say that the base of the Willoughby cross is now in the garden of the former owner of the farm which was demolished in 1999 to enable the building of Cross Hill.

The owner kindly allowed me to photograh this cross base. Apparently it was unearthed in 1964 when the road junction at The Cross was widened to enable buses to turn more easily. The find spot was roughly where the streetname sign appears on the far left of the photograph on page three.

Most probably this base was created in the fourteenth century because Willougby was granted a charter for a weekly market and so a 'market cross' was needed. Such crosses have survived at Frisby on the Wreake, Billsdon and a few other places in the region.

Does anyone know if the original charter for WIlloughby has survived? A parallel situation arose at Wymeswold although so far as is known the cross base has not survived, although the original charter has.

What remains unknown is whether the market at Wymeswold and the presumed market at Willoughby ever 'took off'. They certainly competed with each other, and both would have been secondary to the Tuesday market at Melton Mowbray and the Thursday market at Loughborough. We know the Wymeswold market was on a Wednesay – neatly inbetween – so perhaps the Willoughby market was on a Friday, thereby minimising competition and providing added 'convenience' to residents of the Wolds.

Grateful thanks to Tony Cox and the owner of the cross base.

Bob Trubshaw