

# CROSS-BEARING GRAVE SLABS IN MERSEYSIDE

Charles Williams

".....which stone remaineth until this day"  
I Samuel, VI, 18

## General introduction

### *Cross-Bearing Grave Slabs*

This branch of archaeology has hitherto attracted so little attention that it has no fixed nomenclature. Names have been rather loosely applied to the different types of gravestones and the individual features making up the design of the inscribed or carved pattern. It is therefore necessary at the outset to state and define the terms that have been used in the following writing. The aspects of nomenclature and definitions of the elements comprising the patterns has been studied by a CBA Group 5 Working Party. For this purpose the grave slabs have been divided up into two categories: incised grave slabs— flat, recumbent gravestones which have a cross or other Christian symbol incised upon thereon, and raised grave slabs—recumbent grave slabs whether flat or coped, which have upon them either a cross or other symbol in bas-relief. The older name for this class of stones is 'coffin stones' or 'coffin lids', but this name equally applies to many of the incised slabs for they, too, frequently formed lids of coffins.

These two classes have many features in common, especially in their designs. This connection is expressed by giving to both the same generic name - grave slabs. The name 'raised grave slabs' is perhaps rather clumsy as it conveys the idea of a slab of stone having a raised cross upon it.

### *Incised Grave Slabs*

Grave slabs incised with the name of the deceased person whom they commemorated and frequently with symbols of his trade and other ornaments were in common use amongst Roman and Romanised nations at the commencement of the Christian era. The Christians did not throw aside the fashion, but in addition to the usual inscriptions, cut a cross or fish or some other of the Christian symbols upon their grave stones to indicate the deceased's profession of Christianity. In the Lapidarian Gallery of the Vatican are preserved many of the early Christian monuments which were found in the Roman catacombs. Nearly all these stones bear an incised cross or other Christian emblem. Some have, in addition, an inscription, others an emblem of the trade of the deceased, such as woolcomber's shears and comb, and so forth, and many of them are reminiscent of the common English grave stones of the 13th to 15th centuries.

From these appear to have been derived incised grave slabs so common throughout Europe in succeeding times. The common adoption of the fashion is easily accounted for by the fact that all Roman customs were more generally followed by the subjugated European nations. The frequent pilgrimages to Rome in early times and the frequent communications between the clergy of all parts of Europe, probably also had great effect in producing not only this but in every branch of Christian art throughout Europe.

Incised slabs show great differences in effect produced by different modes of treating the design. Most frequently the device is merely outlined by lines incised in the stone. These lines were sometimes left open and sometimes filled with lead, sometimes with white plaster and sometimes with pitch. It is probable that other colours were also used as was certainly the case upon the continent. In many cases the slab itself was partially or wholly covered.

### *Locations*

Originally grave slabs were located both in churches and in churchyards and in some positions they have a peculiar meaning. Thus the coffin lid of the founder of a church was frequently very significantly placed in the foundation stone of one of the eastern angles of the church. It is very usual to find a grave slab as the threshold of one of the church doors, aside the South door, denoting the humility of the deceased, or perhaps alluding to the text - "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness" (Psalm 84, verse 10).

Some of the stones found in this position may very probably have been removed there to supply a worn threshold stone but the instances in which they are found are very numerous and in many cases the stone has the appearance of being in its original position.

### *Symbols*

It may be sometimes rather difficult for the unpractised to see the cross in some of the complicated designs but the idea of the cross seems to have been so ever-present in the minds of the medieval Christians that they at once caught at anything which even formed a remote resemblance to the emblem of their faith. In some intersecting roads they saw the cross and chose those cross roads as places peculiarly suitable for the erection of their village and station crosses. The soldier stuck his sword upright in the air and its hilt formed the cross before which he prayed. Some 14th century illustrations of crosses show beautifully composed leaves and branches of the vine—the true vine. Lilies were commonly used in the 15th and 16th centuries.



Steps or mounds are frequently introduced at the base of the cross intended to represent Mount Calvary and are technically called 'Calvary'.

Other symbols include:

- Birds drinking out of a vase or cup: an early Christian emblem.
- Bow and arrow: probably a forester
- Crozier: the symbol of an Archbishop
- Double triangle: an emblem of the Holy Trinity
- Fish: introduced as the mystic symbol of the early Christians. It could be confused with the trade of the man who could be a fishmonger
- Horse shoes, tongs and hammer: smith or farrier
- Key: a steward
- Mitre and pastoral staff: Bishop
- Pastoral staff grasped by a hand: Bishop, Abbot, Abbess
- Pastoral staff and book: Bishop
- Scissors and gloves: a glover
- Sheaf and spear: a Knight
- Shears: probably a clothier. It is almost certain that shears were sometimes used as the symbol of a female
- Shield and sword: probably a Knight. Sometimes a sword is placed on one side of the shield and sometimes on the other
- Square: a carpenter
- Sword and knife: a man's arms
- Sword and harp: doubtful, but probably a minstrel
- Sword, keys etc: indicate the rank and profession of the deceased

The plain cross is very seldom used, but almost always an ornamental cross. The symbolist considered the plain cross to be the cross of shame and it is rarely found in ancient Gothic work. The floriated cross was the cross of glory. It is, indeed, the cross adorned with garlands.

### Dating

The shape or size of the stone is no safe guide to its date. It had been thought that the early ones were highly coped and later ones less so, but this is not the case. Many early ones are quite flat and late ones highly coped. Also both in coffin stones and incised stones high-sided coffin shapes are to be found of all dates. Often to determine the date the only guide is the form of the cross and the ornamental accessories.

There are a few stones whose date is actually or approximately known either from incision or from other circumstances. As these are extremely valuable for comparison with others it is useful to know that they are listed fully and illustrated in Cutts (1849).

### Methods

It was felt that there needed to be a sense of urgency in compiling the record and therefore photography was

considered to be the most convenient medium to provide a speedy record. However, the inaccessibility of some slabs, inadequate lighting conditions and in certain locations, unavoidable distortions of the image, meant that a true representation required additional treatment. Several techniques were tried, all aimed at speedy recording of the patterns:

- Drawing the incised lines on glass placed over the slab
- Similarly, using perspex and other translucent materials
- Tracing the incision on aluminium foil
- Rubbing with wax as used in brass rubbing
- Using black pastels and charcoal to trace the outline on white decorator's lining paper.

This latter procedure was adopted for recording the majority of slabs. A preliminary sketch was drawn to identify the significant incised lines and this was then used to assist in tracing the lines of the design with charcoal on lining paper. Touch played an important part in this operation. The outline was then photographed at leisure away from the site. By including the photograph of the slab *in situ* and the drawn outline, a comprehensive representation was obtained. In certain instances it was not possible to use this technique and resort to sketch or other medium was adopted, as indicated in the text.

Lining paper is soft and pliable enough to allow the inscribed lines of the pattern to be delineated without tearing the paper. However subsequent handling results in creasing and folds which show when photographed. To reduce this to a minimum the paper was ironed, using a fairly hot iron, after obtaining the outline of the pattern.

In the case of a design in high relief this procedure could not be adopted and description and photography *in situ* had to suffice. As skill developed in delineating the incised lines in charcoal it was possible to give a 'feel' for depth, width and degree of clarity to the cut stone and for this reason the originals were not re-touched for photography. Whether this is illustrated in the photography is a matter of opinion and interpretation, but it is certainly reflected in the original drawings.

### Presentation of information in the catalogue

For the purposes of this publication the illustrations in the following catalogue have been drawn from the author's original photographs of the slabs and the 'rubblings', except where otherwise stated. The scales which appear on the drawings all show 5cm intervals. Dimensions and descriptions are given in a standard format for each slab. The descriptions are given in alphabetical order of parish, preceded by a brief description of the parish church, where appropriate.



**CATALOGUE OF CROSS-BEARING GRAVE SLABS**
**Bebington, St Andrew's Church**
**SJ 333839**
**(Cross slabs Nos 1-4, Fig. 1)**

The earliest church at Bebington would have been made out of wood, but it is known that a stone church was built at some time before the Norman Conquest. There are still traces of the Saxon church, a few courses of the south wall being incorporated into the Norman church. In 903 the 'Chapel' of Bebington was given to the Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester. It is probable that the Saxon church/chapel was still the only building at this time but Norman rebuilding must have followed closely on the gift. Alterations and additions have followed continuously; Tudor rebuilding took place just before the dissolution of the monasteries. Minor alterations took place during the Victorian period. The raising of the chancel and general re-flooring of the church 1878 subsequently interfered considerably with the tombstones within the church and many are now obscured including some of the medieval grave slabs. The last burials under the church took place in 1838 in the nave. An oil painting *c.*1790 showing the nave includes what appears to be a group of four medieval cross-bearing grave slabs (Green undated, illustrations).

There is no record of a Rector of Bebington before 1294, but from then on the list is complete.

**No. 1.**

Length	81cm
Width	45cm
Thickness	set into floor
Material	sandstone

A large fragment of slab with well-defined incised lines. The pattern terminates in a trefoil decoration.

**No. 2.**

Length (2 stones)	160cm
Width	50cm
Thickness	set into the floor
Material	sandstone

The two pieces of stone have been inaccurately set into the floor. Although the two patterns match reasonably well it is suggested that these were two distinct slabs originally.

**No. 3.**

Length	630cm
Width	290-204cm

Thickness	6cm
Material	red sandstone

The slab is set in a deep cement bed on the wall of the South aisle and, in consequence, the thickness is indeterminate, varying from 6 to 8cm. Carved in low relief, ring headed with eight arms, the shears are especially deeply carved and are not an additional symbol. Both are clean and heavily chamfered.

**No. 4. (not illustrated)**

This fragment of slab is set into the arcade above the arch of the nave at the West end at an inaccessible height for measurements, therefore the dimensions quoted are an estimation:

Length	30cm
Width	7.5cm reducing to 4cm
Material	red sandstone

The illustration by Cox (1897, plate 13) shows a portion of the cross arm of the presumably Trefoil cross, but this is not now evident.

**Birkenhead Priory, St Mary's Church**
**SJ 328885**
**(Cross Slabs Nos. 5-15, Figs 1-4)**

The original charter and early muniments of the Benedictine Priory of Birkenhead have perished but it is known that it was founded in AD 1150. It occupies a site on a headland bounded by Tranmere Pool and the Wallasey Pool. At the base of the headland was the ferry terminal for the ferry crossing of the Mersey founded and operated by the monks, one of the reasons for the choosing of such a position for the Priory.

Little is known of the monastic graveyard which existed on the headland close to the Priory. Tombstones have been found and are now located in the old Norman chapel, which became the chapter house when a larger chapel was built by the monks. Only one is identifiable, that of Thomas Rayneford, Prior, who died in 1473. It was dug up in 1818 and 'three skeletons in a very perfect state' (Bushell 1957, 144) were found underneath.

**No. 5.**

Length	147cm
Width	44cm
Thickness	set into floor
Material	sandstone

An extremely large slab has been assembled from three pieces, the centre piece appears newly tooled in comparison to the others. The right hand side has been cut away and the pattern is incomplete.

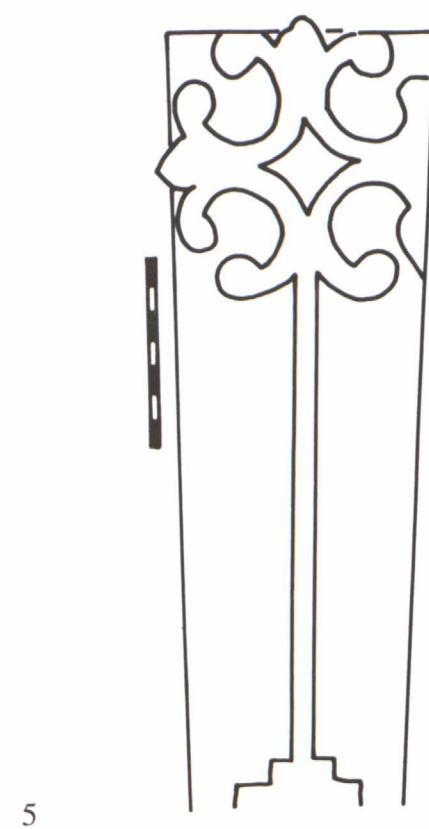
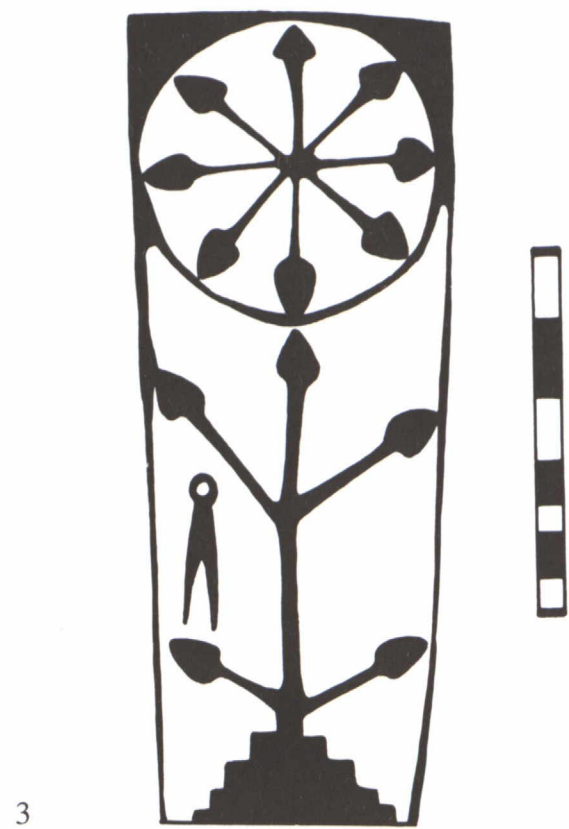
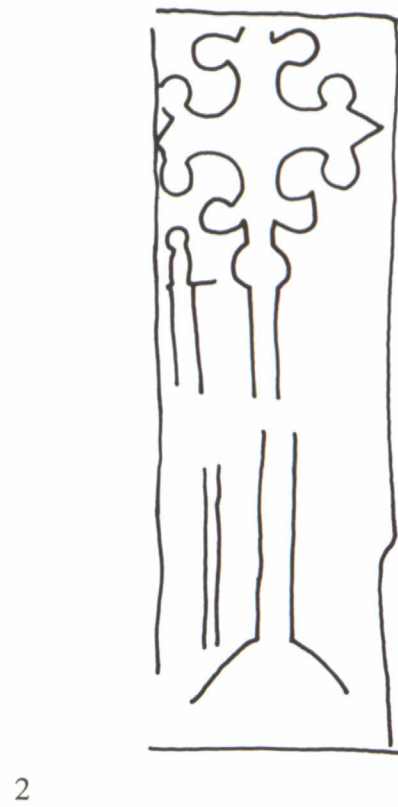
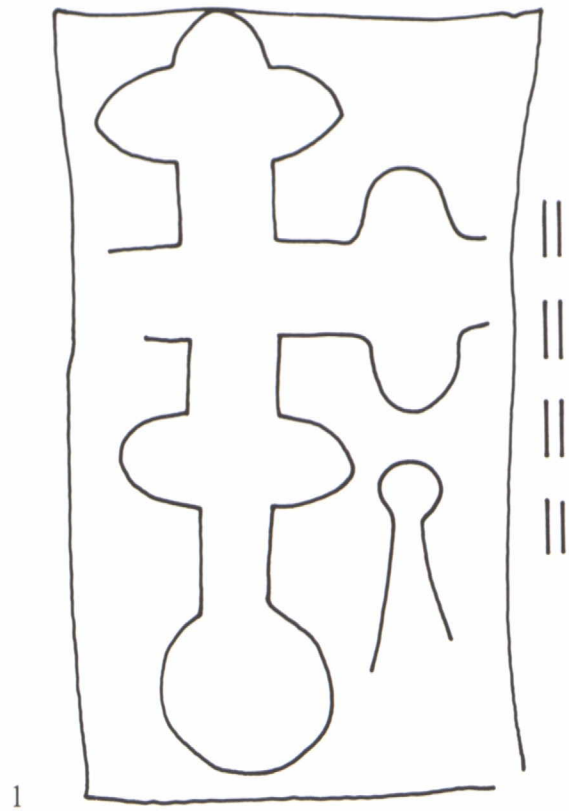


Figure 1: Cross slabs Nos 1-3 from Bebington St. Andrew and No. 5 from Birkenhead Priory (no. 4 not illustrated)

**No. 6.**

Length	102cm
Width	38cm
Thickness	set into the floor
Material	not recorded

The stone appears to be foreshortened and this view is supported by the lack of a calvary mound. Areas of the 'bracelet' have eroded away. The pattern suggests a 13th century dating.

**No. 7.**

The overall dimensions are:

Length	47cm
Width	32cm
Thickness	not recorded
Material	sandstone

The pattern in the right hand top corner is that of a separate fragment of a slab measuring:

Length	12cm
Width	15cm

There is insufficient pattern to allow a reasonable interpretation, but in the shape of a cross with an accompanying sword or spear shaft is suggested.

**No. 8.**

Length	100cm
Width	38cm
Thickness	set into the floor
Material	red sandstone

The slab has been restored at the time of re-siting. Incising is deeply cut.

**No. 9.**

Length	31cm
Width	33cm
Thickness	set in floor
Material	sandstone

Fragment showing shaft of cross on a five step calvary.

**No. 10.**

Length	28cm
Width	43cm
Thickness	set into the floor
Material	sandstone

Carved in fairly high relief. Two fragments are set in

the floor, the fragments of No. 11 fitting neatly against this slab so that first impression is that the two stones form one slab. The sword hilt and "Rosette" are clearly carved. An effort was made to produce a plaster cast in order to illustrate more effectively these features, but the method was ineffectual and results did not do justice to the subject.

**No. 11.**

Length	23cm
Width	42cm
Thickness	set into the floor

Material	sandstone
----------	-----------

This stone was immediately below the 'sword hilt' stone (No. 10). The pattern suggests a shield. Incised cross lines, indication of chevrons, appear between the double lines on one side only.

**No. 12.**

Length	104cm
Breadth	37cm
Thickness	set into the floor
Material	sandstone

**No. 13.**

Length	25cm
Width	28cm
Thickness	set into the floor
Material	sandstone

There is insufficient form in the position of these four lines to suggest a possible pattern.

**No. 14.**

Length	88cm
Width	37cm
Thickness	set into the floor
Material	sandstone

The pattern is well cut. The stone has been extensively repaired *in situ*.

**No. 15.**

Length	74cm
Width	30-20cm
Thickness	set into the floor
Material	sandstone

This slab is well incised and in good condition.

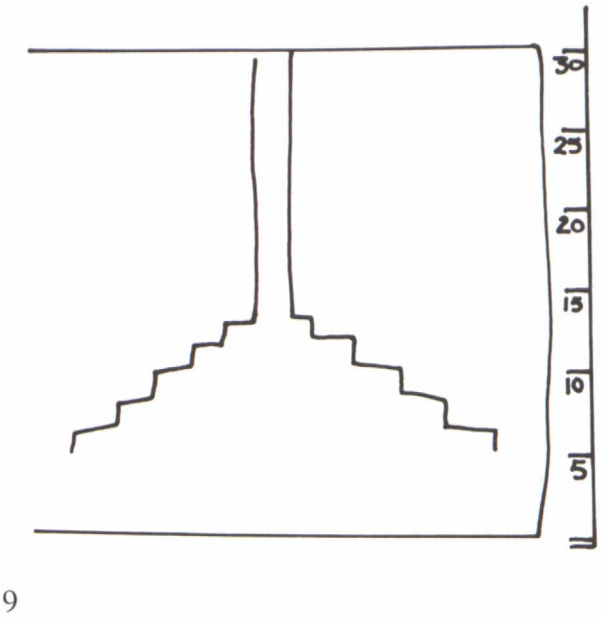
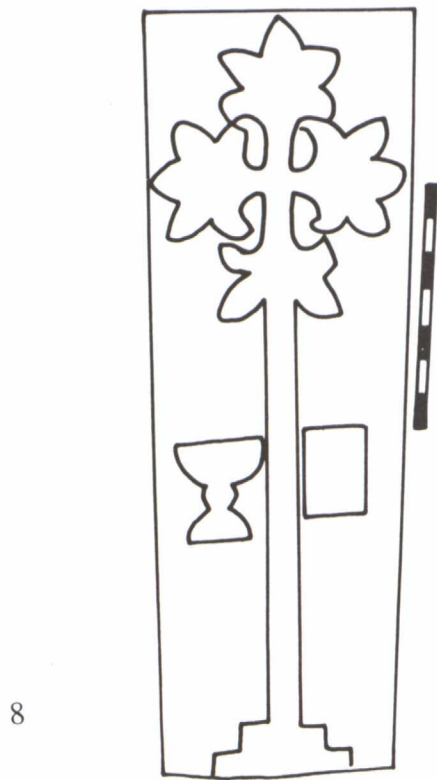
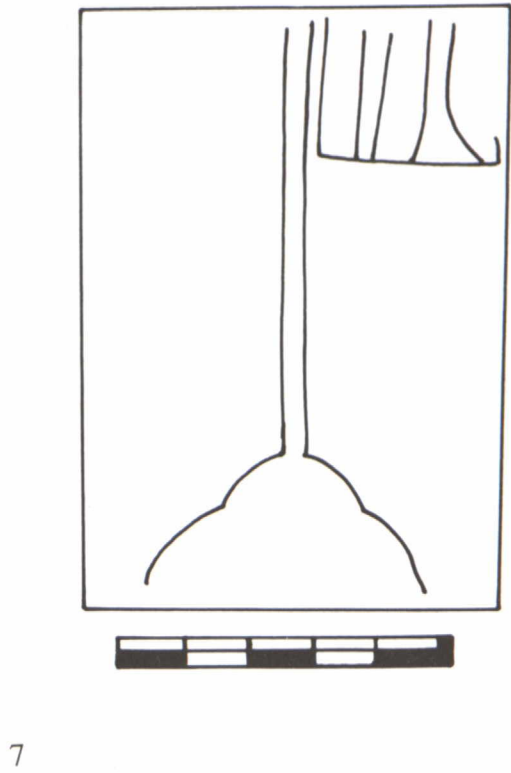
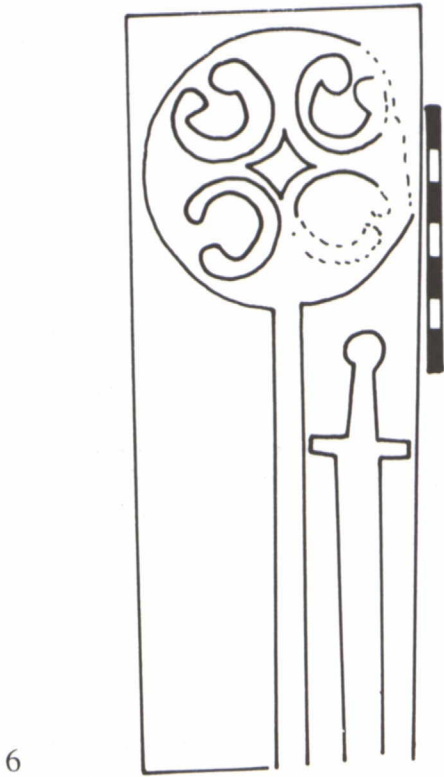


Figure 2: Cross slabs Nos. 6-9 from Birkenhead Priory



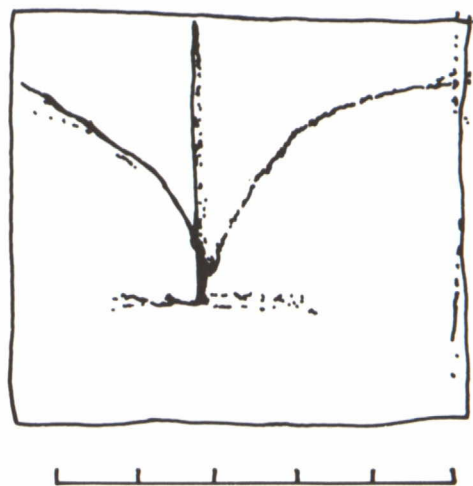
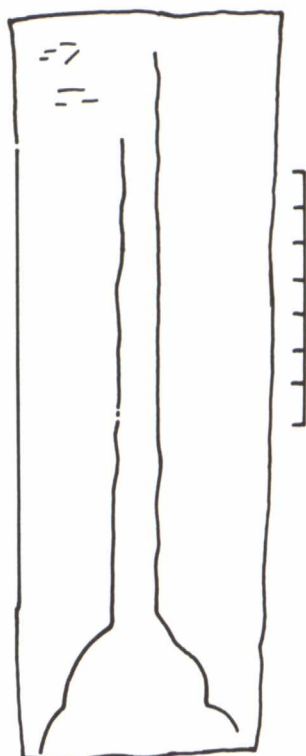
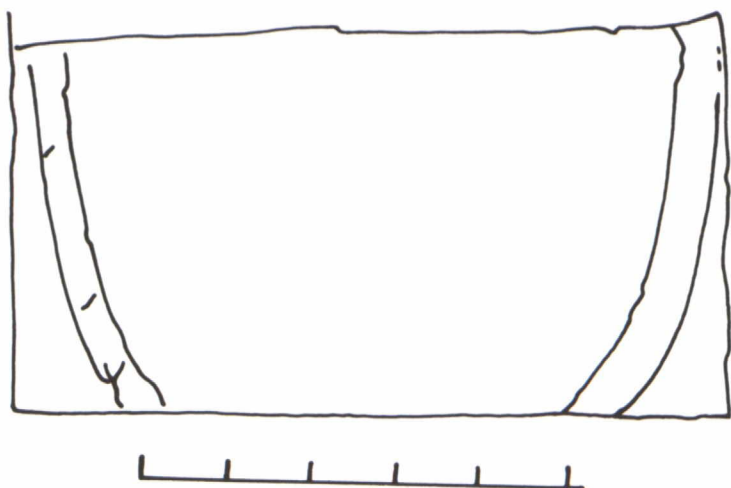
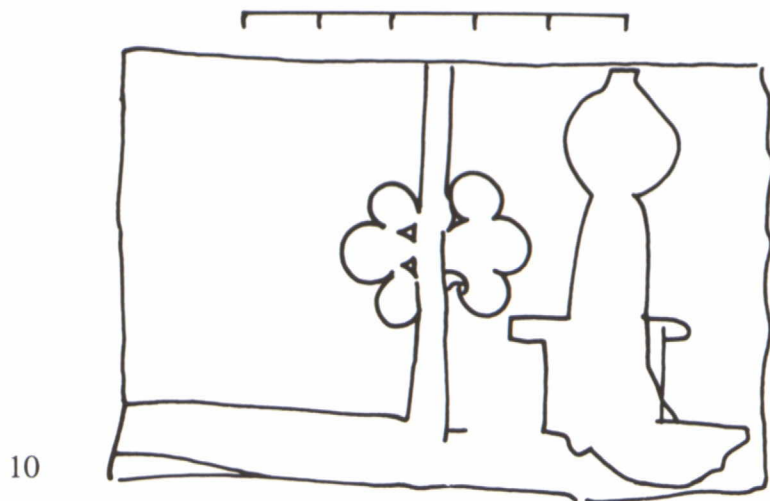


Figure 3: Cross slabs Nos 10-13 from Birkenhead Priory

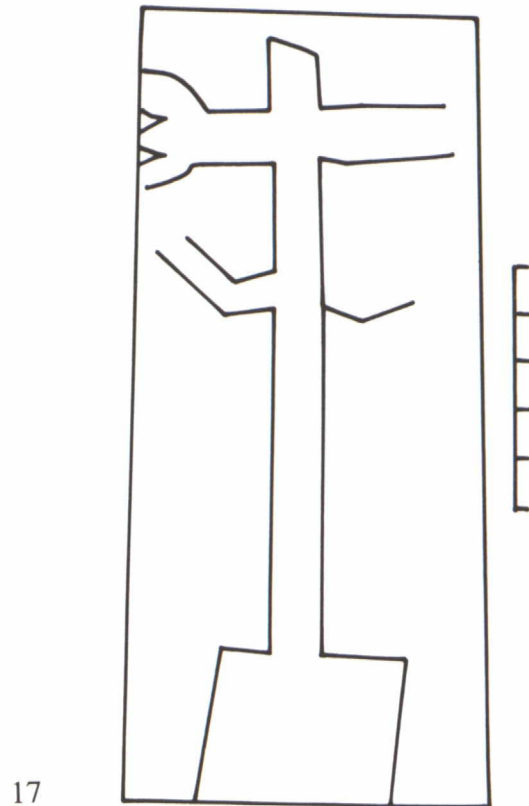
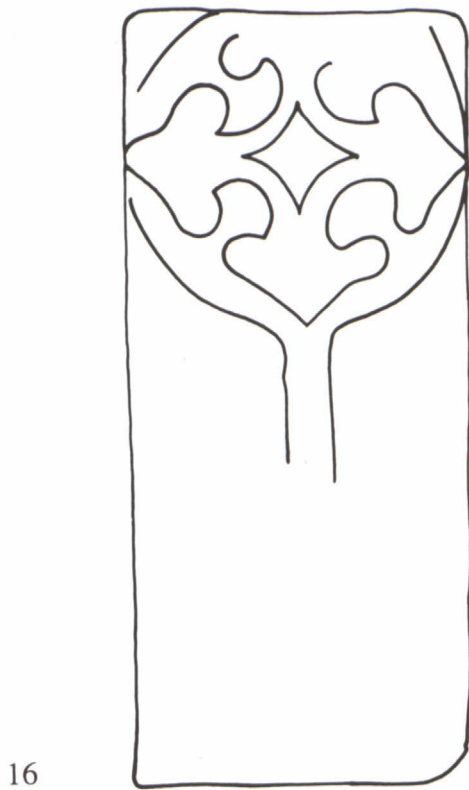
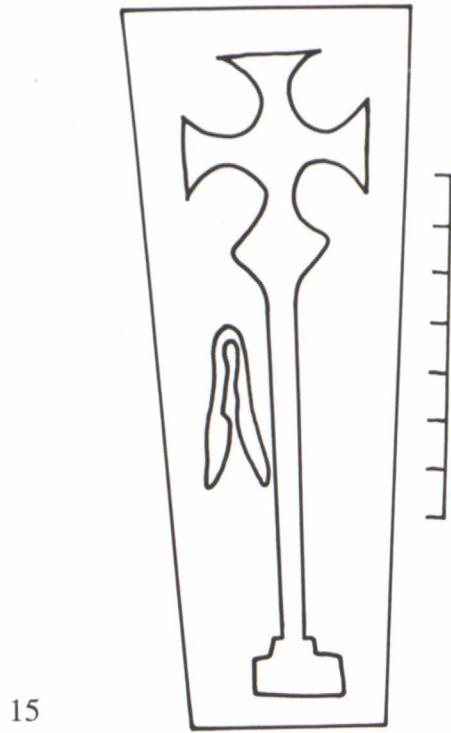
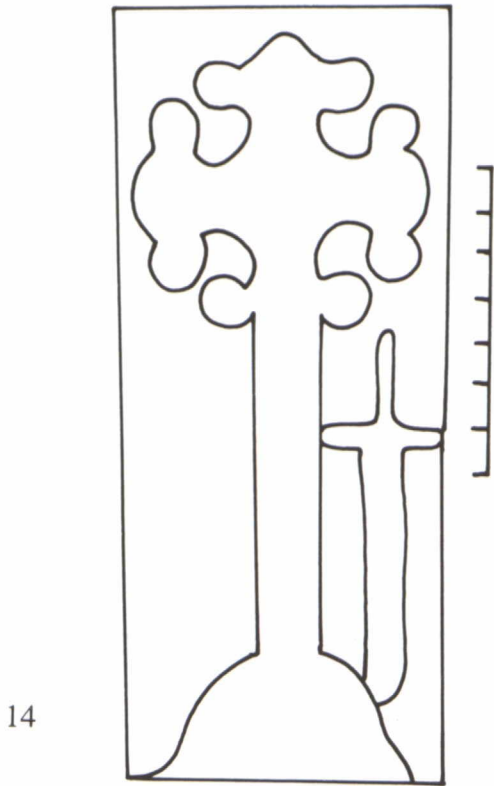


Figure 4: Cross slabs Nos 14 and 15 from Birkenhead Priory, No. 16 from Williamson Art Gallery and No. 17 from All Saints Childwall



**Birkenhead, The Williamson Art Gallery and Museum**  
**SJ 309880**  
 (No. 16, Fig. 4)

The grave slab is in care of the museum and is listed as Stock Item No. 794.

**No. 16.**

Length	1005cm - 945cm
Width Top	45cm
Bottom	41cm
Thickness	varying from 175cm to 21cm with the thickest area being central
Material	red sandstone

This incomplete stone was found during the construction of the Meols/Leasowe embankment. The surface is very much weathered. The back of the stone is uneven and unworked, but the sides are squared and are diagonally tooled. Incised lines have been filled with dark mortar which accentuates the design; a trefoil cross is executed rather crudely and is significantly asymmetrical. Similar designs to the slab are in West Kirby.

The following supporting documentation, from *The Cheshire Sheaf* March, 1920, is interesting:

‘Thirteenth Century Grave-slab found at Meols’.

The following letter appeared in a recent issue of the ‘Liverpool Daily Post’ and is perhaps worth putting on record in the columns of the ‘Sheaf’

HOLLY

*An interesting relic of 13th century has come to light on the Meols shore owing to the breaking of the sea wall near where it joins the old Leasowe Embankment. A number of stones that formed the core of the new embankment have been washed out during the recent gales, and one of these was noticed by Mr. J.W. Hutchin, of Great Meols, to bear traces of early carving.*

*On examination this proves to be a 13th century grave-slab in the local red sandstone, shewing on its upper surface a lightly incised floriated cross of a well-known conventional type. The stone is a little over three feet long and one and a half feet wide at the head, while the thickness is between seven and eight inches. When complete it must have been over five feet in length, but the foot—containing the lower part of the stem of the cross and the Calvary steps—is missing. The design is almost precisely the same of that found on a grave-slab found during recent excavations at Birkenhead Priory.*

*It would be interesting to know whence this stone came before it was buried, a few years ago, in the embankment. It no doubt came originally from one of the local churchyards, and West Kirby seems the most*

*likely source, but it must have had an intermediate sojourn in some wall or field fence in the neighbourhood.*

*It is to be hoped that the local authorities will see their way to saving this interesting relic from being buried once more in the new patches in the sea wall, or from being broken up to make concrete. If the Trustees of The Charles Dawson Brown Museum, at West Kirby, can see their way to find house room for the stone, the best solution would probably be to remove it to that building, where it would be carefully protected along with the other interesting sepulchral monuments preserved there.*

The following are notes from an earlier survey :-

*Sandstone : surface friable and easily worn. Carved areas filled with a dark mortar which shows up the outline of the design. Undersurface very uneven and unworked; sides are squared and are tooled with diagonal striations, probably toothed chisel.*

*Decoration is executed crudely and is asymmetrical but similar design to example in St. Bridget’s, West Kirby.*

*Found amongst rubble in embankment of Meols/Leasowe area and possibly removed amongst demolition rubble from a neighbouring church. Nearest medieval churches are: West Kirby, Upton, Moreton (chapel), Hilbre (chapel) and Wallasey. All of these had either been completely demolished (Upton, Moreton and Hilbre), or substantially re-built by the date of the finding of the stone. Now in collections of Williamson Art Gallery and Museum, Slatey Rd., Birkenhead, Wirral. Stock No. 794.*

I quote below the text of a letter from the Dock Engineer’s Office relating to the grave-slab:

WALLASEY EMBANKMENT COMMISSION

Engineer’s Office,  
 Dock Office,  
 Liverpool  
 8 March 1920

Dear Sir,

Referring to your letter of the 3rd inst. ... as to the finding of a 13th century Tomb Slab, I have to say that the stone referred to, which is 3’3"x1’5"x7", is of old red sandstone, roughly dressed, and has inscribed on one face a Floriated Cross. The stone has been used since 1895 in the dry pitched work in front of the extension work, immediately adjoining the west end of the old embankment and has been handled many times by the Commissioner’s employees.

It is impossible at the present time to say how this stone originally came to the embankment, but prior to



1895, when extension work was commenced, many hundred tons of rough stone were laid on the foreshore, as a protection to the western end of the old embankment. These stones were probably laid there during the early sixties, or perhaps even before then. I cannot say whether this stone was tipped on the foreshore for the purposes of protection or whether it came from some other source.

Yours faithfully,

(sgd) Thos. M. Newell  
per A.F. McC.

W.C. Thorne, Esq.,  
Dock Office.

### Childwall, All Saints' Church

SJ 415892

(No. 17, Fig. 4)

The first historical reference to Childwall is in the Domesday Book. A church building is known to have existed here since AD 1394; a chapel existed by AD 1484 within the church building dedicated to St. Thomas the Martyr, but when it was actually built is not known.

There are four ancient patterned stones in the wall of the porch and one of these is described as a coffin lid having a barbed cross. This stone has recently been covered by a glass-fronted light oak cabinet for exhibiting current notices of church activities. The glass front, and ineffective lighting combined to make photography difficult. Furthermore it was only possible to measure and sketch the stone through the glass and in consequence the dimensions are not strictly accurate, but are a reasonable approximation.

#### No. 17.

Length	85cm
Width	35cm
Thickness	set into the wall of the porch
Material	light red sandstone

The surface of the stone is smooth and in good condition, and obviously has been cleaned along with the cleaning of the sandstone walls of the porch.

### Melling, St Thomas's Church

SJ 388002

(No. 18, Fig. 5)

The name of Melling is derived from the Old English name *Mellingas* which literally means 'the followers of Mealla'. It is a tribal name, preserving the memory of a small independent group of migrant settlers of the 6th

century AD who reached Lancashire via the valleys of the Pennines.

Melling lies upon a peninsula of high ground and it is probable that west of Melling the present coastal plain was an uninhabited swamp. The eminence of Melling would be a natural moot hill and the obvious place for burial. In 1389 the Bishop of Lichfield held an enquiry into a certain event which took place at the burial ground; he questioned whether the burial ground and the chapel then existing had ever been consecrated. Evidence was given that "the chapel was from ancient times, while the churchyard had been used as a burial place time out of mind". The earliest mention of this chapel is in the Cockersands Chartulary about AD 1190. The chapel was dedicated to the Holy Rood (Holy Cross) and in the churchyard there is the base of an ancient cross.

In AD 1551 the Royal commissioners visited the 'Ancient Parochial Chapel' and reported on its contents, and in 1592 the Bishop of Chester's visitation reported on the condition of the Churchyard wall amongst other things requiring attention.

This chapel fell into such a state of disrepair that early in the 19th century it was decided to build a new church to the north of the old site. The new church was opened in March 1835. In 1872 extensive repair was necessary and the opportunity was taken to extend and refurbish the building, and in December 1873 the Bishop of Chester consecrated the new church, renamed St. Thomas (Bulpit 1908).

#### No. 18.

Length	2m
Width	74-48cm
Thickness	20cm
Material	sandstone

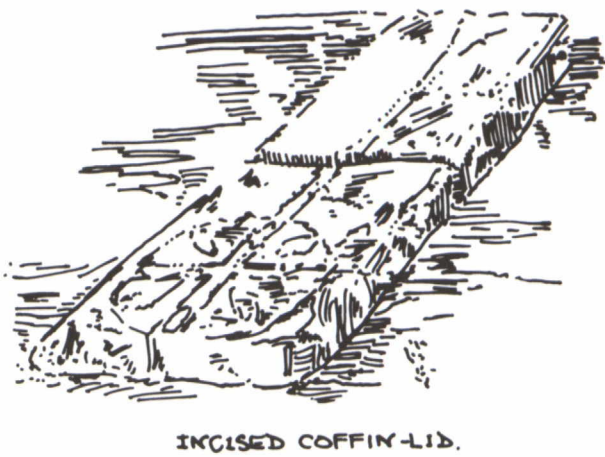
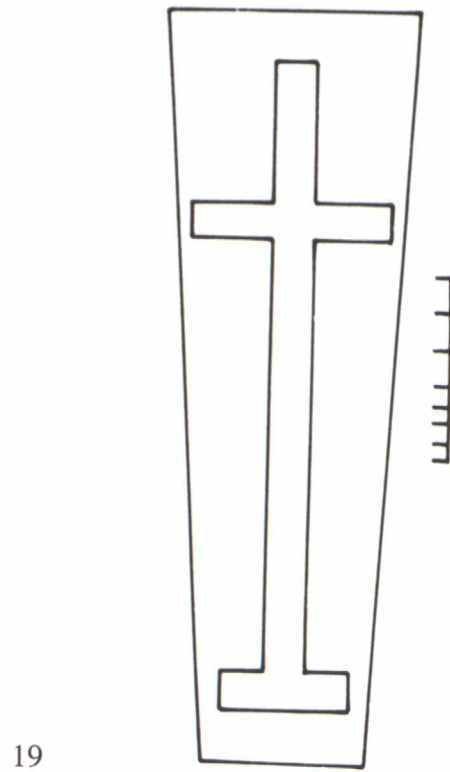
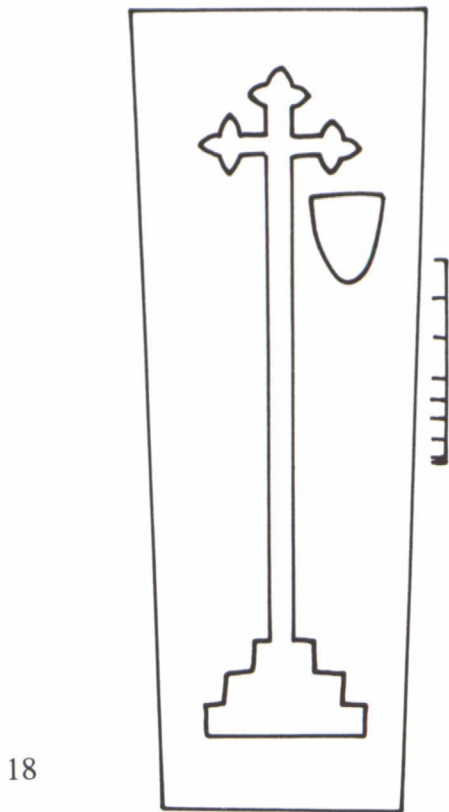
Situated in the churchyard some 20m to the south of the church. The slab is carved in relief and the surface, although showing signs of erosion, is in good condition. Locally the slab is referred to as the 'Crusader's stone'—no doubt inspired by the symbol of the shield. Reference is made to this slab by Bulpit (1908, 137) "... a full-length grave slab with floriated cross, on the right hand side of which is a shield, at least 700 years old", and one could not reasonably argue against the suggested date of AD 1150.

### Overchurch

SJ 264889

(No. 19, Fig. 5)

This is the site of Overchurch—"The Church on the Shore"—the name of the old ecclesiastical parish. The church was of Saxon foundation and served the village



20

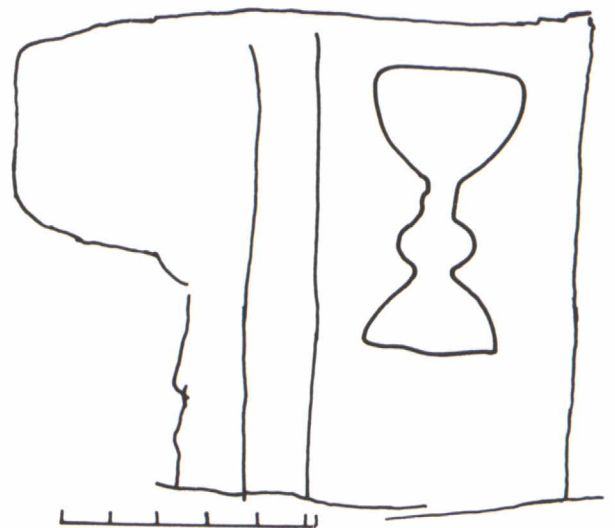


Figure 5: Cross slabs No. 18 from St Thomas's Melling, No. 19 from Overchurch, Nos 20-21 from St Helen's Church Sefton (No. 20 re-drawn from Caröe and Gordon (1893))



until AD 1813 when it was pulled down. Any masonry that could be used was removed to a new site near Upton. Among the stones was a Runic stone now in the Grosvenor Museum, Chester. There are several interesting gravestones of the 18th century scattered about the site.

**No. 19.**

Length	204cm
Width	62-46cm
Thickness	19-20cm
Material	red sandstone

The grave slab is situated in an abandoned burial ground midway along the road from Moreton to Upton. A field path which is opposite to the exit of the Moreton spur of the M53 motorway leads to a copse within which is the neglected and overgrown burial ground.

The grave slab was heavily overgrown with lichen and partly hidden under nettles, weed and sycamore seedlings. A certain degree of vandalism had taken place and one very deep incision 17cm long by 1.5cm deep was the result of maltreatment or vandalism, not weathering.

The massive stone is carved in low relief and the simple Latin cross is standing on a single step plinth. Although the carving is carefully executed the slab itself is roughly finished along the sides. It was not possible to adopt the method of tracing the pattern on lining paper because of the large size of the slab and poor weather conditions. Careful measurement has realised the accurate drawing of the cross but there has been no attempt to draw correctly the rough shape of the slab itself.

Dating evidence was not available, but probably it is of the period *c.* AD 1200.

**Sefton, St Helen's Church**

**SJ 356012**

**(Nos. 20-21, Fig. 5)**

The township of Sefton, or Sephton, lying about seven miles north of Liverpool, was adopted as the home of the Molyneux family soon after the Conquest. The stones and the architecture of the church demonstrate the age and growth of this church, built on the present site of the chancel *c.* 1170, into an early English church of *c.* 1320. Since 1540 little has been added to the church except the choir vestry in 1915.

The following quotation is from Carøe and Gordon (1893, 6).

"The accompanying sketch shows an early (probably 13th century) incised monumental slab half of which,

curiously enough, forms a quite unnecessary and incomplete ceiling to one of these turrets and half that to another. Fortunately, the incisions on the slab are turned downwards".

**No. 20. (not seen, no measurements made)**

Three visits were made to the turrets which are located above the bell tower and equally spaced around the spire and although the incomplete ceilings were noted it was not possible to discern the incised pattern on the stones. For protection the ceilings of the turrets were covered with close-meshed wire netting. This was a disappointment but opportunity was taken to photograph the graveyard and the edge of the tower parapets which showed some curious inscriptions (not relevant to the present paper).

In the Molyneux chapel, formerly the Molyneux Chantry, on the south side are some ancient stones unearthed during restoration work, and included is the 13th century grave slab—presumably that of a priest; the two lines are almost certainly the stem of a cross at the side of which is the inscribed chalice symbol described next.

**No. 21.**

Length	51cm
Width	58cm
Thickness (maximum)	19cm
Material	yellow sandstone

Located, free standing, in the Molyneux chapel. The surface is quite heavily pock-marked.

**West Kirby, The Dawson Brown Museum, St Bridget's Church**

**SJ 217864**

**(Nos. 21-27, Fig. 6)**

Founded in 1892 in memory of a noted local benefactor, the Charles Dawson Brown Museum is attached to the Old Schoolroom (now part of the Church Centre) to the south east of the churchyard. This museum contains the relics of Christian worship and burials on this site for nearly a thousand years.

There are remains from four periods. First, the era before the first stone church, the Norman church was built. These include fragments of 11th century stone crosses, perhaps preaching crosses, also a Saxon font and a Celtic-type gravestone.

Secondly, there are a few stones from the Norman church—pillar capitals, pillar base and gutter-stone. They are the sole visible evidence there is for the existence and character of the Norman church. In the middle of the room is a fine gravestone of about 1125. The stone coffins may date from this period also.

Thirdly, there are a number of stones—from columns, window heads, buttresses, spandrels—from the next, Gothic, church on this site and some fine gravestones from the church or churchyard. The church was built from local red sandstone, beautiful in hue but friable. Much of it had to be replaced in the restoration of 1869-70.

Fourthly come items from the period since the fabric of the Gothic church was completed, including gravestones.

**No. 22.**

Length	80cm
Width	58cm
Thickness	17cm
Material	grey sandstone

The pattern is almost indistinguishable. It appears to have been limewashed at some period. The fragment is large and the proportions suggest that it represents about one third of the original stone.

Smith (1865) described this as a Norman Sepulchral Cross and gives a detailed description of its finding and retrieval in 1864 from the site of an early conventual cemetery on Hilbre.

The following notes are from Collingwood (1928, 22).

'This is an example of an early cross-slab series with swollen stem. Others are the slabs at Kirkclaugh, Minnigaff and Anworth in Galloway which can be dated to about 1100.

The four bosses in a circle tell us little. They are found in slabs, apparently late, at Meifod, Montgomery and Llanwnnws, Cardigan, but that is not enough to fix the design as particularly Celtic. It seems to be of the latest Viking style, common to all the Norse settlements on this seaboard.'

**No. 23.**

Length	78cm
Width	44cm
Thickness	16cm
Material	reddish grey freestone

Smith (1871, 25 and plate 4) describes this slab and No. 24 as 'sculptured incusely with floriated crosses, in good design, closely resembling those upon the reverses of silver pennies of the late Saxon and Danish kings'.

**No. 24.**

Length	68cm
Width	27cm
Thickness	14cm

Material reddish grey freestone

The arris which remains is rounded off, the other side is cut away. Date is attributed to the 13th century. Again, the floriated pattern suggests relationship to coinage of Danish or Saxon kings. There is evidence of this stone having been built into a structure.

**No. 25.**

Length	92cm
Width	51cm
Thickness	17cm
Material	light red sandstone
Date	c. 1125

The following notes are from Collingwood (1928, 23 and fig. 9) and Smith 1871, 25 and plate 4). 'The face is hacked in relief; the sunk spandrels and edges are pecked over, ... the back is roughly chiselled. The stem has been outlined with a chevron, like the late Cornish headstones at Helston, Scornier and Clowance. There are chevrons of this sort, though more crudely done, in Cumberland, at Crosscanonby and Egremont on slabs which seem to be rather early 12th century. That the old tradition lasted well on into the century is not to be doubted: the proof, in architectural matters is given by Dr John Bilson in his papers on Weaverthorpe and Wharram-le-Street; and in monumental ornament, it is increasingly clear that the overlap period in the north of England and in various out-of-the-way districts lasted long. This West Kirby slab seems to be an instance and though it cannot be dated closely, it must be of the times politically Norman but socially not yet Normanized, which here may have lasted well on into the 12th century.'

There is evidence which suggests this stone had been used in a structure—possibly a gate post.

**No. 26.**

Length	108cm
Width top	51cm
bottom	44cm
Thickness	18cm
Material	red sandstone

The surface is slightly convex. Tooling on sides, well radiused edges. Carved sharply in low relief some 10mm high. Inscribed initials JC, NO and KC are obvious additions, along with the symbol of shears. According to Collingwood (1928, 24 and fig. 10), before removal to the museum the stone marked a possible 17th century burial in the graveyard and it was probably at this period that the initials were inscribed. The slab is dated to c. AD 1100.



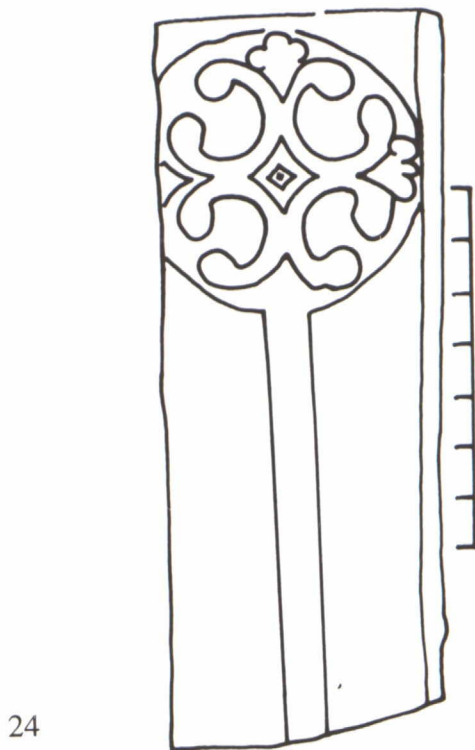
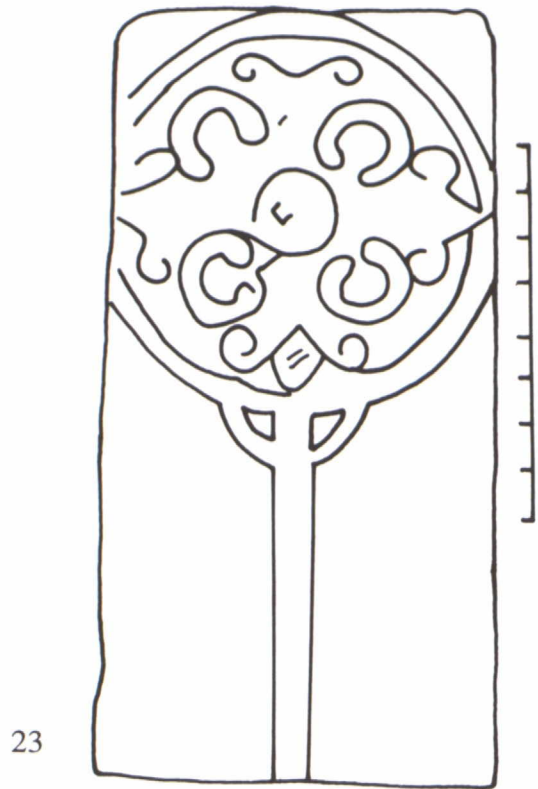
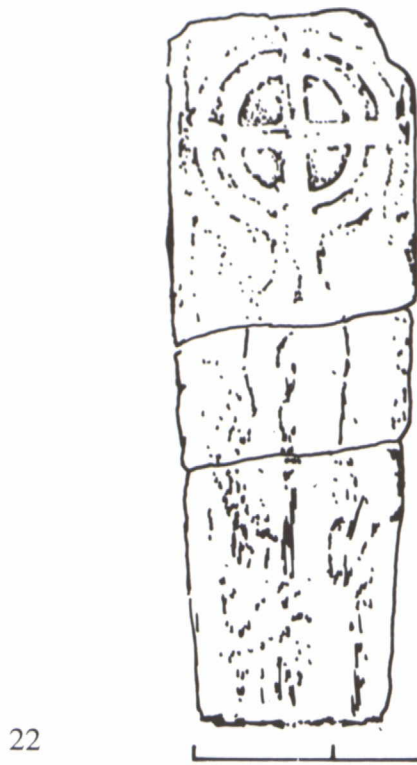


Figure 6: Cross slabs Nos 22-25 from the Dawson Brown Museum, West Kirby



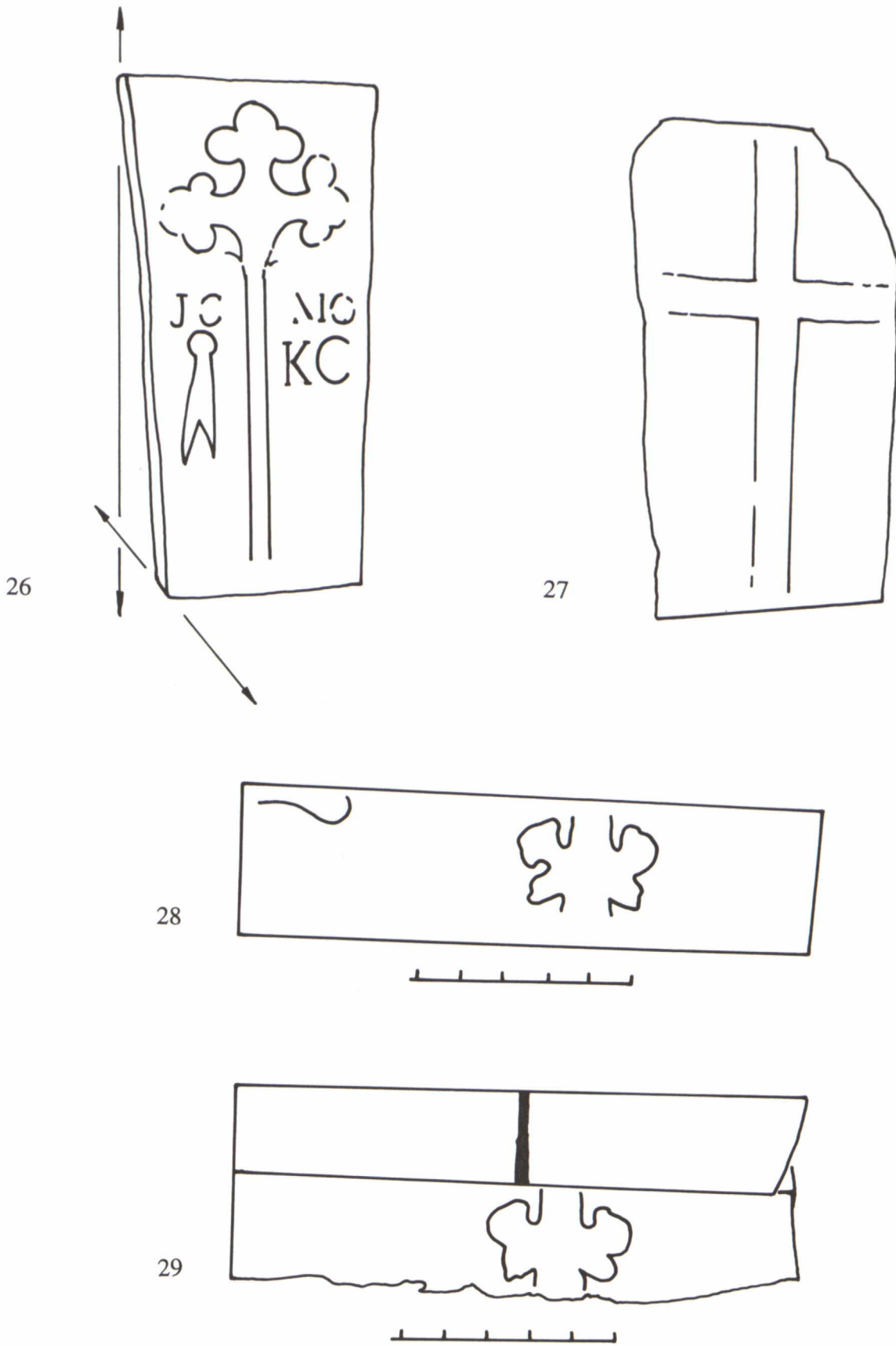


Figure 7: Cross slabs Nos 26 and 27 from the Dawson Brown Museum and Nos 28 and 29 from Church of the Holy Cross, Woodchurch

**No. 27.**

Length	142cm
Width top	51cm
bottom	34cm
Thickness	175cm
Material	sandstone

In parts the pattern of the cross is indistinguishable. It bears a plain Latin cross with the upper arm expanding very slightly, sketched with incised lines on a plain field. In the absence of ornamentation there is little to fix its date except that a similar slab was found in York in association with pre-Norman remains and with another slab bearing a cross of the form seen in the leaden plaque found in St Austin's Abbey, Canterbury and inscribed to Wulfmaeg, sister of Abbot Wulfric with the date of her death 11 March 1063. Such a grave-slab was therefore possible in the later half of the 11th century (Collingwood 1928, 23-4).

**Woodchurch, Church of the Holy Cross****SJ 275868****(Nos. 28-29, Fig. 7)**

The township of Woodchurch is not mentioned in Domesday survey of 1086, but there is reference to a priest in the adjoining township of Landican. First mention of Woodchurch appears in the confirmation charter of Earl Hugh Lupus *c.* AD 1100. It seems likely that the name 'Woodchurch' referred to a church in the wood rather than a church made of wood because of the wooded nature of the area and the fact that wooden buildings would be common and not worthy of mention. The first name on the list of Rectors for the church of the Holy Cross is Gilberte de Woodchurch, AD 1264.

Despite many restorations, the church retains much of its old masonry. The tower is 14th century and is surmounted by a plain battlement. Shoring up of the north wall and tower with heavy buttresses took place in AD 1675. As often happens in old churchyards, the level has been raised with the passing of centuries. It is worthy of mention that close to the path leading to the porch is an ancient stone cross which came from Auray in Brittany and was presented to Woodchurch in AD 1879.

Under each of the two buttresses immediately to the right of the porch is what appears to be a fragment of grave slab. The slab under the second buttress is almost certainly part of a slab bearing a floriated cross. In the other instance, insufficient pattern is evident to enable an opinion to be formed on the probable pattern.

**No. 28.**

Length (total)	56cm
Projecting from buttress	17cm
Width	66cm
Thickness	23cm

The sides are roughly finished but the top surface is smooth and heavily radiused at the side and top. The pattern is rather irregular and crudely executed.

Bearing in mind the tradition of building a grave slab into the foundation of a church there may be some significance in this stone appearing in its present position.

**No. 29.**

Length (including portion under the buttress)	43cm
(projecting from buttress)	15cm
Width	63cm
Thickness	17cm
Pattern:	short incised line 2.5cm
	long incised line 19cm

The right hand side of the slab is very roughly cut to size to suit the width of the buttress.

**Acknowledgements**

The author thanks his tutor, Peter Davey, and Gill Chitty, Field Archaeologist for Merseyside, who suggested the project in the first instance and followed this with continued advice and support. Susan Nicholson and friends with the Archaeological Survey of Merseyside team and within the Merseyside Archaeological Society, without whose practical help this paper could not have been written.

Thanks are also extended to the incumbents and church officers for permission to record the grave slabs in and around their churches. Valuable assistance and information was given by Cliff Thornton, Curator Williamson Art Gallery and Museum, Birkenhead and thanks are also due to Rod Tann for help at the Dawson Brown Museum.

[Editor's note: The original text of this paper was submitted to the University of Liverpool in 1981 as a dissertation for the Diploma in Practical Archaeology. The illustrations have been re-drawn from the author's original photographs by Paul Roberts, Liverpool Museum. Susan Nicholson edited the proofs and corrected the references. Many thanks.]

## References

- Bulpit W. 1908 *Notes on Southport and District* Southport: The Visiter Printing Works.
- Bushell W.F. 1957 'The Ancient Graveyard at Birkenhead Priory' *Trans Hist Soc Lancashire Cheshire* **108**, 141-6.
- Caröe W.D. and Gordon E.J.A. 1893 *Sefton* London: Longmans, Green, and Co.
- Collingwood W.G. 1928 'The Early Monuments of West Kirby' 14-26 in Brownbill J. *West Kirby and Hilbre* Liverpool: Henry Young and Sons, Ltd.
- Cox E.W. 1897 'Architectural History of Bebington Church' *Trans Hist Soc Lancashire Cheshire* **49** (NS 13 for 1897) 97-122.
- Green R.L. undated *St Andrew, the parish church of Bebington* A church publication, privately printed.
- Smith H.E. 1865 'Notice of an early conventual cemetery in Wirral' *Trans Hist Soc Lancashire Cheshire* **17** (NS V, for 1864-65), 270-6.
- Smith H.E. 1871 'Reliques of the Anglo-Saxon churches of St Bridget and St Hildeburga, West Kirby, Cheshire' *Trans Hist Soc Lancashire Cheshire* **23** (NS 11 for 1870-71), 13-47.
- The Cheshire Sheaf March 1920 'Holly' 1922 'Thirteenth century grave-slab found at Meols' *The Cheshire Sheaf* 3rd Series **17** (for 1920) 23-4 Item [3986].
- Further reading**
- Brindley W. and Weatherley W.S. 1887 *Ancient sepulchral monuments* London: Privately printed.
- Bushell W.F. 1950 *Birkenhead Priory and after* Liverpool: Liverpool letterpress (Magazines) Ltd.
- Cutts E.L. 1849 *A manual for the study of sepulchral slabs and crosses of the Middle Ages* London and Oxford: John Henry Parker.
- Ellison N. 1955 *The Wirral Peninsula* London: Robert Hale and Company.
- Liverpool Diocesan Directory 1970/71
- Mortimer W.W. 1847 *The History of the Hundred of Wirral* London Whittaker and Co.
- Newton E.E. 1969 *Melling with Cunsough* Melling: Melling Parish Council.
- Ormerod G. 1882 *The history of the County Palatine and City of Chester* 2nd edition, **2** London: George Routledge and Sons.
- Richards R. 1973 *Old Cheshire Churches* London: B.T. Batsford Ltd.
- Stewart-Brown R. 1925 *Birkenhead Priory and the Mersey Ferry* Liverpool: The State Assurance Company Limited.
- The Victoria County History of Lancaster* **3** 1907 West Derby Hundred, London: Archibald Constable and Company Limited.
- OS Sheet 108 1:50000 First Series