



Lilla Cross on Fylingdales Moor

Albert Elliot

The moorland areas of northeast Yorkshire are studded with the remains of three dozen or so named crosses or waymarker stones, said to be Britain's largest concentration of old stone crosses. Due to the crosses' great antiquity, it is impossible to know with any certainty by whom or for what purpose they were placed there, but most were probably erected in the Middle Ages for use as boundary markers or as waymarkers to direct travellers safely along their route. The crosses seem to sit comfortably in their surroundings and some in particular have an immutable air of mystery attached to them: Lilla Cross is one of them.

These stone relicts of varying ages exist in differing conditions. Some have only their socket stones surviving. Many are now just stumps with shafts either totally or partially missing, some have undergone repairs after suffering natural wear and tear or have been damaged by wanton vandalism. Others are, miraculously, still standing intact and in remarkably good condition considering their great age and the constant battering and attrition they have endured from exposure to the harsh elements. Perhaps the best known of the moorland crosses is Young Ralph Cross on Blakey Rigg, adopted in 1974 as the main emblem on the official logo of the North York Moors National Park, following a public competition.

Lilla Cross on Fylingdales Moor has survived down the centuries in remarkable condition. Thought to date from the 10th century, Lilla Cross is the oldest on the North Yorkshire Moors and regarded as one of the earliest Christian monuments in northern England. It is a protected historic monument.

Many people ask about the origin of the name. Legend has it that Lilla was the faithful minister or manservant of Edwin, King of Deira and Bernica (later known as Northumbria). A rival king of the West Saxons sent an assassin to kill Edwin. On Easter eve in the year 626 the assassin made an attempt on the King's life by lunging at him with his double-edged poisoned dagger. Lilla, who was nearby, anticipated what was happening and swiftly flung himself between the King and the assassin's blade. In doing so Lilla was fatally wounded and died on the spot. The thwarted assassin was slaughtered by the King's men. The King's life was saved and he was so moved by the bravery of Lilla, a Christian, that in recognition of his loyal servant's act he ordered a stone cross be erected at the very place where the murderous attempt took place. The king also commanded that the dead hero be buried beneath it. Although the current monument dates from many years after the event it commemorates, it is known as Lilla Cross.

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In 1952, Fylingdales Moor became a military training area, and Lilla Cross was moved from its ancient site and repositioned at Simon Howe, well away from harm. When some years later military activity ceased in the area, it was decided to return the monument to Lilla Howe, its original location. This was a delicate job as the cross had unfortunately been set in concrete when moved to its temporary location. Fortunately, the work was to be carried out by a group of Sappers (as the Royal Engineers are popularly known) of 508 Field Squadron from Horden, a colliery village on the coast about five miles north of Hartlepool, County Durham.

The first task facing the soldiers was to construct a special supporting cradle in which the Cross could be safely transported to the Squadron Drill Hall at Horden, where the difficult task of removing the one and half tons

or so of unwanted concrete could be undertaken. It was of great advantage to the project that the Sappers involved were experienced miners in daily life and expert with hammer, pick and chisel; they had just the skills required for such a delicate task. They went on to complete the work and re-erect the Cross without harming the 1300-year-old relic: quite an achievement. As a testament to the Sappers' work, a plaque is sited nearby the ancient monument.

Today the ancient cross still stands erect on Fylingdales Moor in tribute to Lilla, King Edwin's faithful servant who saved his master from certain death by the assassin's knife. Lilla Howe is a very atmospheric place. Go alone on a quiet evening and stand and listen by the lonely Lilla Cross on the moor and you can almost hear the cries echo down the years from that fateful day over thirteen centuries ago: history comes alive.



Find out more

Historic England on Lilla Cross and others:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1010076>

Steve Estill's 2017 book, 'Stones and Crosses of the North York Moors', published by Fonthill Media, is an excellent guide to Lilla Cross and other stones.



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