

Helpston's Market or 'Butter' Cross by the Reverend W C H Seal, M. Div.

This article first appeared in the autumn 1989 edition of the Helpston Chronicle and was written by the then rector of the combined benefice of Etton, Helpston and Maxey.

Several times in the recent past Mr George Boyden, our noted village historian, and I have spent some time discussing the various ancient village monuments of Etton and Helpston parishes. Of particular interest to both of us has been the Market Cross, or 'Butter Cross' as it is commonly called, standing at the centre of Helpston village.

The Market Cross is generally conceded to be of 14th century work. Dan Crowson, in one of his very interesting books, asserted that the Market Cross never had an actual cross fixed to the top of the shaft, while Bessie Garfoot-Gardner in her history of Helpston, says that the summit cross disappeared sometime in the past.

In order to understand our Market Cross it is first necessary to understand something of the Medieval mind. WE moderns all too often are unversed in Christian symbolism. The number four, for example, conjures up nothing of note ordinarily. However, in a largely illiterate society, teaching by pictures and symbols was the norm. When an unlettered peasant entered a church in the 14th century, the pictures in the stained glass windows told him or her the story of salvation. Numbers, as well as images, were well known in those days to be symbols of religious truth.

'One' symbolised God.

'Two' indicated the two natures of Christ, Divine and Human.

'Three' represents the trinity of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

'Four' is the number of the Four Gospels and their authors, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

'Five' stands for the five wounds of Christ, in his two hands, both feet and side.

'Six' is the number of the Devil in the Bible, which in Revelations is 666.

'Seven' is called the perfect number, and is the number of days of the Creation, the week and the Seven Sacraments of the Church.

'Eight' represents the eight Beatitudes in the Gospels, 'Blessed are the poor ...'

'Nine' was also the number of the Trinity, since it is the product of multiplying the number three by itself.

Many other numbers have symbolic value in the Christian religion as well, but by applying some of these numbers to Helpston's Market Cross we can see, through the Medieval eyes its intended purpose, which was to teach the Faith.

The Market Cross stands on a base in the shape of a heart, the point of which is oriented to the south-west, said to be the direction of the sun at its zenith. The heart represents the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which is the essence of all love. The sun at its zenith represents the Resurrected and Ascended Jesus, who is above all and who is the 'Son' in glory. The four stars to the Cross stand for the Four Gospels and their authors, which we must 'climb' in order to come to Christ. The eight sided decorated base of the Cross's shaft symbolises the Beatitudes which are eight, which we must practice in our lives to live the Christian life (read the Sermon on the Mount, Mathew 5:3-11). From this eight sided construction it would have been both logical and necessary in religious symbolism for a cross to have surmounted the now empty shaft with its bronze cap and finish.

Dan Crowson said in his book on Helpston in John Clare's time that the Market Cross had fallen into disrepair and had finally been restored at the turn of the 19th century. One might rightly assume that the cross at the top had fallen prey to the elements, or to the more extreme 17th century reformers, but a cross it must have had, otherwise the entire construction would have been for naught.

The next time you wander down to the Helpston Village Green, take a look at the Market Cross and consider what it means to you.

