

THE TOMBSTONES IN THE TOWER

In the tower at St Mary Hill, fixed to the west wall, are three old tombstones with barely-legible inscriptions. If you look carefully at the one behind the ladder (take a torch and shine it *across* the stone) you will see the very faint outline of a cross, upside down. Look even more carefully and you will see that there are not one but three crosses, on a stepped base.

Most medieval tombstones had a cross on them, and some have extra little crosses as decoration. But tombstones with three full-size crosses are very unusual, and all the ones we know of are in Glamorgan. There is one very like the St Mary Hill cross at Laleston, set into the chancel pavement. Another similar one is at Llangynwyd, against the west wall of the church.

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There is one with a rather different design at Margam, in the ruined choir of the abbey church. This one has been earthed over to protect it from the elements, but it was photographed before it was covered.

So were these triple crosses just a local fashion, or do they have a deeper significance? The church at Llangynwyd was a famous pilgrimage shrine in the Middle Ages. Pilgrims came from all over south Wales to see the great carving of the Crucifixion on the rood screen in the church. Poets (the PR people of their day) wrote about it. It was the monks of Margam who looked after the shrine, and Laleston was on the main route to Llangynwyd, the medieval road called the *Ffordd y Gyfraith*. It is possible that the triple crosses reflect the design of the rood screen at Llangynwyd and that the carvings there showed the two thieves as well as Christ on the cross. This would have been unusual, but some of the poems to the shrine do mention the thieves.

But where does St Mary Hill fit into this? The church isn't really on the road to anywhere. It is possible that someone from St Mary Hill went on a pilgrimage to Llangynwyd and found it a life-changing experience, so that it was commemorated on their grave. Or the triple crosses may have a wider meaning. Late medieval religion was very much focused on preparation for death. There were books of advice on the 'good death', with pictures for those who couldn't read. These pictures warned you about the temptations which could assail you on your deathbed, and showed ways of dealing with them. One of the most dangerous temptations was despair: the picture showed little demons reminding the dying person of all their sins and saying things like 'you have fallen'. Against this you were promised the help of saints who had made a mess of their lives and got back on track. St Mary Magdalen, the 'sinful woman' of the gospels; St Peter, who betrayed Christ; St Paul, who persecuted the early church; and

the good thief. The thief had not even had time for repentance and confession: but he had recognised Jesus and said 'Remember me when you come to your kingdom', and he had been promised 'This day you will be with me in Paradise'. These were comforting words to be remembered in a tomb carving.

One final puzzle. In *Medieval Churches of the Vale of Glamorgan*, Geoffrey Orrin said that the church at St Mary Hill had two floriated medieval tombstones in the tower – elaborately decorated crosses like the ones at Llantwit Major and Llanblethian. They are now nowhere to be found. The three crosses on the tombstone behind the ladder are very plain. The churchwarden has lived in St Mary Hill all her life and has no recollection of any other cross slabs. Was Geoff Orrin making it up – surely not! He was very meticulous in his fieldwork, but the tower at St Mary Hill is dark and the stones are difficult to see. He may have been relying on an old description of the church that mentioned the decorated tombstones. It is even possible that the crosses are on the backs of two of the stones in the tower, and that they were reused with new inscriptions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. People in the past were quite comfortable with reusing tombstones. The triple cross slab has two later inscriptions on it – one round the edge in seventeenth-century script commemorating a Hopkin Watkin and the second at the top (over the base of the cross) reading 'Nest Hopkin dyed Feb ye 4th 1722 Aged 76'.

Does anyone in the parish have any more information on these intriguing stones?

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