

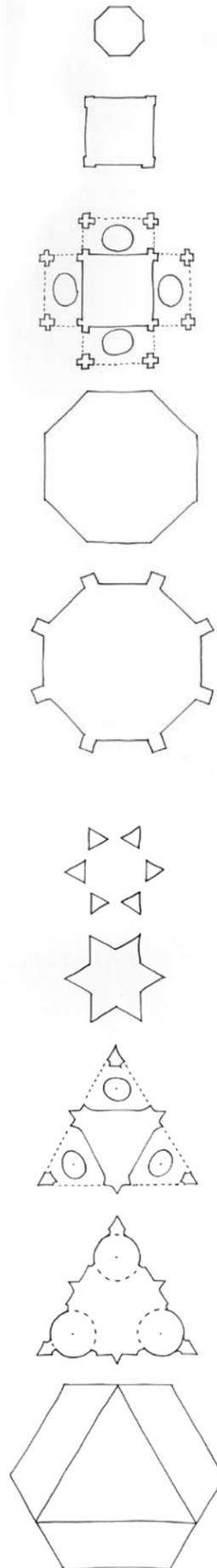
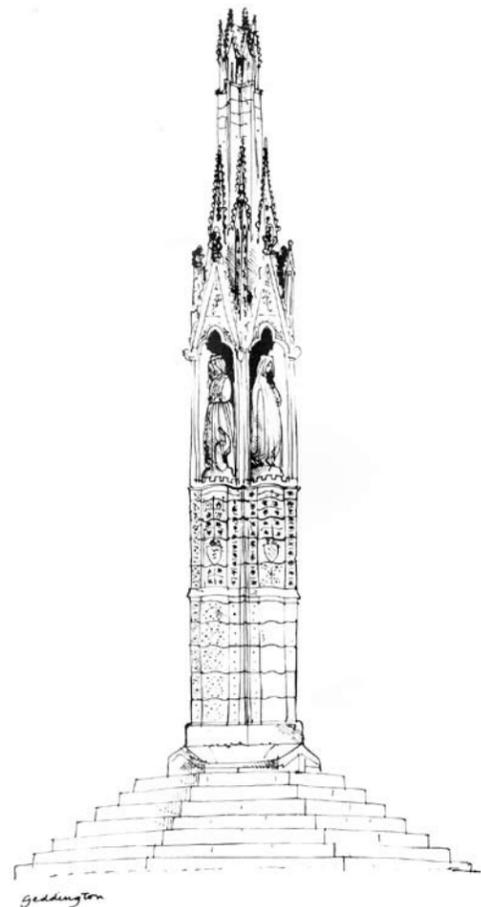
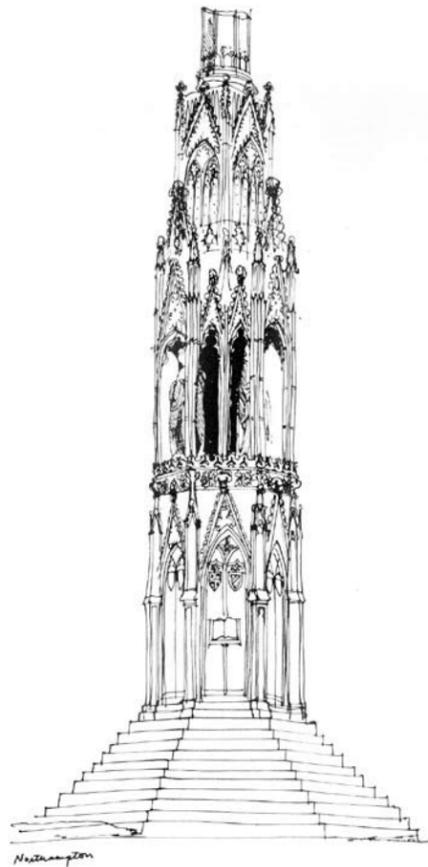
## The Northampton Crosses

Two almost undamaged Eleanor Crosses still stand, one by a busy road just outside Northampton and the other seventeen miles to the north in the quiet village of Geddington. Both are well worth visiting, and a closer examination reveals them to be much more complex and extraordinary structures than they seem at first glance. Apart from the curiously calm yet lively statues of Queen Eleanor, the first impression is merely of tall and gracefully proportioned shafts, each ending in a sort of spire, and of silhouettes whose interest outweighs any other feature: a familiar characteristic of northern Gothic building, appropriate to our misty atmosphere in which a silhouette is often all that we can see. But a closer scrutiny reveals not only intricate and exotic surface decoration, quite unlike any other Gothic details, but something even stranger: a remarkable superimposition of interrelated geometric forms in the ground plan and cross sections of the successive layers of each monument, exotic forms which have no precedents within the European Gothic tradition.

One cross is basically eight-sided, the other essentially triangular, but these are harsh over-simplifications. At Northampton, the stepped plinth and lower shaft are octagonal. Above them, the sculptures stand with their backs to a square central core which supports a twelve-sided canopy over the figures. The upper shaft is again a simple square in section, while above it the broken pillar on top is octagonal.

The slender Geddington Cross is even more complex. Its stepped plinth and its lowest course are six-sided, and the apex of an apparently simple triangular shaft rises naturally enough from the central point of three of these six sides. But the sides of the triangular are subtly modelled, each side containing two shallow curved surfaces which, when seen at an angle, inescapably reveal themselves as segments of three cylindrical forms we can imagine embedded within the triangle. The top of each of these three cylinders provides the base for one of the sculptured figures of Queen Eleanor which stand with their backs to the triangular core, now much smaller and inverted. Above this again, at canopy level, the cross is again a simple triangle in section, but further up still the core has yet again been cut away into a twelve-faceted shaft like a six-pointed star in section; yet higher, these six points become the topmost circle of six pinnacles, which forms a delicate crown to the whole beautiful and subtle work.

One can get no idea at all of these subtleties from a photograph, and they are hard to convey simply either in words or in a drawing. But no one walking around the crosses can escape sensing their effect of masterly underlying simplicity and perfection. ■



Queen Eleanor Cross, Geddington, Northamptonshire

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