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A Cross for Queen Eleanor

The story of the building of the mediaeval
Charing Cross, the subject of the decorations
on the Northern Line platforms of the new
Charing Cross Underground Station

Printed to mark the occasion of the opening
of the Jubilee Line on 30 April 1979 by
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCE OF WALES.

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Author's note

When London Transport commissioned me to design the mural decorations for the Northern Line platforms at Charing Cross station, I chose as the subject the building almost seven hundred years ago of the original Charing Cross in what was then the village of Charing. In the course of the task I had to find out about the methods and organization of the craftsmen who built the Eleanor Crosses, and also discovered their significance in the architecture of their time. This book is the fruit of that research.

It is not a scholarly treatise. It attempts, like the decorations, to give the interested Londoner (and visitor) some idea of the working lives and the skills of the craftsmen of an earlier time and, in a way, to acknowledge our debt to them.

The illustrations are enlarged from prints from wood engravings which were made on boxwood blocks. For the station decorations, similar prints were further enlarged and screenprinted with great skill and care by Perstorp Waverite Limited on to the wall panels which run from end to end of the platforms.

I would also like to record my debt to the many medieval illustrators and to the historians and scholars whose works made my task possible, some of whom are mentioned in the bibliography; and to thank Herbert Spencer for his invaluable help in designing this book.



Charing Cross to most Londoners means only a hazily-defined area somewhere between Trafalgar Square and the Thames, with a hotel, a hospital (now moved to Hammersmith) and a number of stations with, until recently, a confusing variety of names. But long ago it meant something much more tangible and precise. For three and a half centuries, a real solid Charing Cross stood where the statue of Charles I stands now, one of the great sights of London, as familiar in its time as the nearby Nelson's Column is in ours: the tall and splendid monument which had been built in Charing village to remind Londoners of their resourceful and faithful Queen, Eleanor of Castile.

Eleanor was the beloved wife of King Edward I. She married him at Burgos in Spain in 1254 when both of them were very young; she accompanied and sustained him on his Crusade; it was said that when he was wounded by an assassin, she saved his life by sucking the poison from the wound; she traveled with him on his perilous expeditions to Wales; and during their thirty-six years of marriage she bore him fifteen children. It was written of her that 'to our nation she was a loving mother and the column and pillar as it were of the whole realm.' During these years her husband became not only an energetic and powerful warrior king but also a remarkable builder; the Tower of London and eight great castles in North Wales stand as his own most solid and striking memorial. Eleanor the Faithful died at Harby in Nottinghamshire in 1290. Her body was taken to nearby Lincoln where her heart and entrails are buried; then the body was embalmed and, accompanied by the King and his court, was taken in a great funeral cortege to Westminster. At each of the twelve stopping-places on the road the King selected a place to build a monumental cross to her memory; they came to be called the Eleanor Crosses. Three of them still survive, at Geddington in Northamptonshire, at Northampton and at Waltham Cross in Hertfordshire. Her body lay at last in Westminster Abbey, under the bronze effigy which suggests to us, as vividly now as it did almost seven hundred years ago, a graceful and serene woman. The stone tomb encasing it was made by the King's mason, Richard of Crundale, and he it was who, at the King's mews in the nearby village of Charing, built the last and most splendid Eleanor Cross of all: Charing Cross.

No one knows exactly what it looked like. The Puritans pulled it down in 1647 and used the stones to pave the ground outside White Hall, and the few surviving drawings of it tell us very little. It seems probable that, like the eight-sided Northampton cross, it was a tall polygonal structure carrying six or eight statues of the Queen, that it stood on a stepped plinth, and that a large cross stood on top of its spire. The Victorian 'Charing Cross' in the Strand outside the Southern Region Station is not a restoration or even an accurate reconstruction but a Gothic Revival work of the imagination, built in 1865 by the railway company; of the genuine crosses, Waltham Cross has been much too thoroughly, even disastrously, restored to retain any feel of the original. But by looking at the beautiful crosses at Northampton and Geddington we can guess at the elegance of Charing Cross itself. The time was ripe for building it; indeed, at about this time, 1290-94, the most active developments in Gothic architecture were no longer taking place in France (its original source) but had shifted to England; building here over the following twenty or thirty years reached a peak of invention and achievement whose influence was to spread through Europe.

Self-confidence and stability under King Edward played a part in this architectural upsurge, but the underlying reasons for it stretch back to the Normans, whose determination and efficient organisation had transformed English building. Norman vigour and enterprise had flourished in an increasingly, if only relatively, stable and prosperous country. To establish their supremacy and prestige here, the newcomers had had to build castles, monasteries, and great churches; they had organised adequate and reliable supplies of stone, first from Normandy and then from newly-developed English quarries; and having at first brought over their own Norman masons, they had then set in train enough work to call forth great numbers of skilled English carpenters and masons. As these skills developed, there grew an astonishing mastery of construction, in which clever and complex ideas were closely matched by skilled and developing craftsmanship, for in Gothic architecture idea and execution were inseparable. Buildings were designed not by architects who had been sheltered by education and upbringing from practical building work, but by highly skilled masons, with great breadth of experience; the same men knew how to design and erect castles, houses, churches, to build, in short, for kings and cut-throats. There was no practical reason for them to specialize, and masons' guilds had not yet invented one by dividing the craft into strictly demarcated functions. Master masons were concerned not with any aesthetic style as such, nor with following any classical model, but only with building as practically and efficiently as they knew how. And since the skills of artist, craftsman and technologist, which we now generally assume to be separate and distinct, were only just beginning to be differentiated at all, a mason was, as has been well said, at the same time composer, conductor and member of the orchestra.

