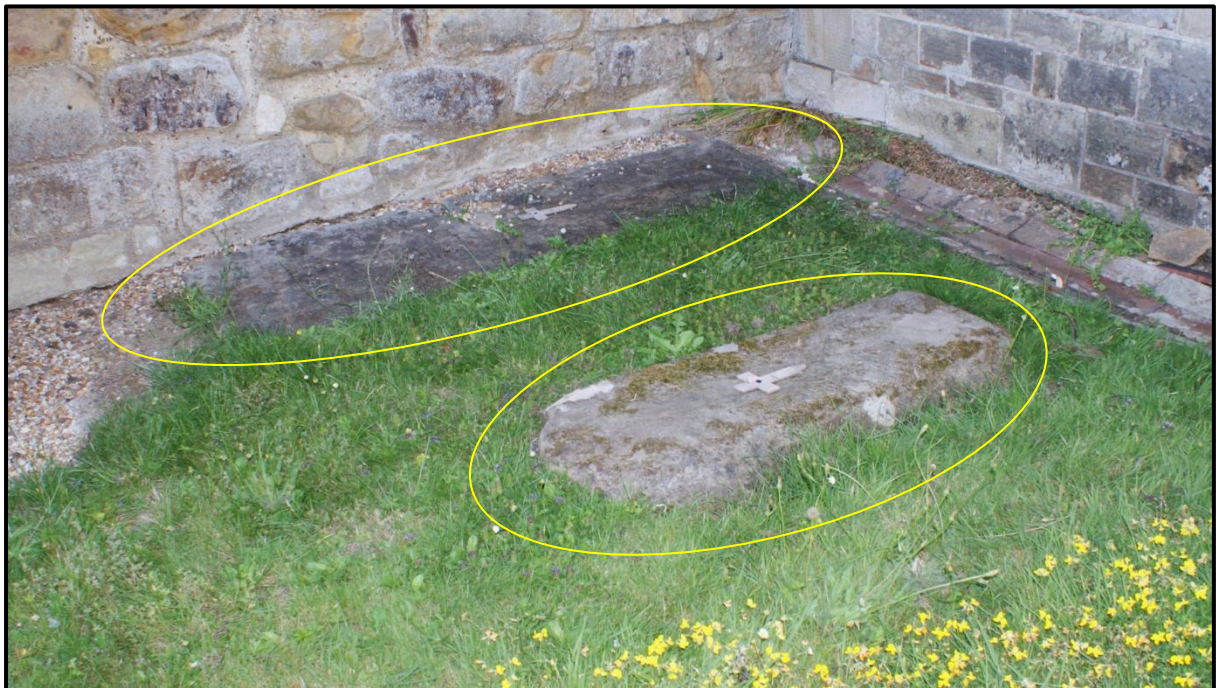


Two medieval graves at Newick church - are they the remains of crusaders?



'...on the tower side of the south porch there are two interesting 13th century flat tombstones...' (*St Mary's Church, Newick - History and Guide* published in 1958, revised 1987)

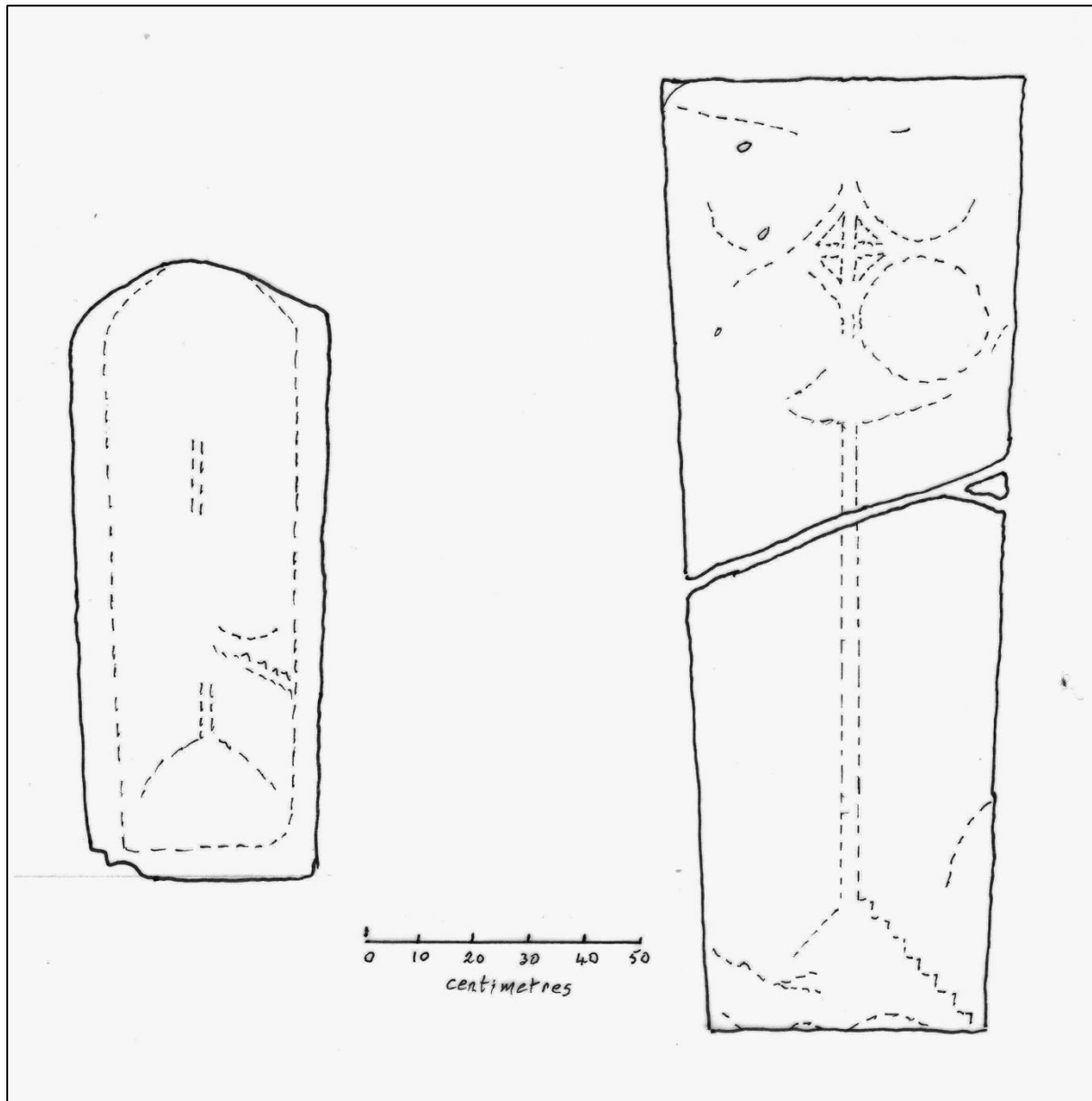
Two medieval graves at Newick church - are they the remains of crusaders?

The guide for St Mary's church, Newick, first published in 1958 and subsequently revised and re-published, states that '*...on the tower side of the south porch there are two interesting 13th century flat tombstones.*' They have been referred to over the years as 'crusader's graves'.

A single sheet leaflet entitled 'St Mary's Church,' designed for children, refers to the two flat graves, stating that '*...It is believed that deep beneath these stones lie the bones of two knights who fought in the Crusades.*' A simplified and updated illustrated guide to the church, particularly for children, refers to one of the stone slabs, stating that it is '*...said to be the grave of a crusader from the 12th century.*' Crusaders were knights and nobles, including from from Britain, joining in to fight the Pope's chosen enemies in the holy land of the eastern Mediterranean, 1095-1269 (part of the 11th-14th century medieval period).

Both slabs are lying flat and are therefore strictly termed 'ledgers'. They are both of sandstone, which is the local underlying strata. The largest slab lies immediately adjacent to the old Norman wall of the church and is of full-size body length (172 centimetres) with a width of 49cm - 65cm. The smaller slab is much less than body length, being 112cm long, with a width of 42cm - 48cm.

Below, are modern sketch drawings of the two slabs. Both slabs are very eroded and weathered, as would be expected, but still retain some faint stone-masons handiwork.



Modern sketch drawings of the two slabs - 2017

The larger slab has the representation of a cross at the top of a long shaft with a base comprising a stepped pedestal, all carved in relief. The smaller slab has chamfered edges with less clear markings.

The two Newick slabs have been described as being from the 12th or 13th century medieval period, making them the oldest grave markers in the churchyard. Web sites exist by professional archaeologists referring to medieval 'cross slab grave covers' usually being placed flat (recumbent) and having a central cross motif. Illustrated examples are provided, including some showing the shaft of the cross with a stepped, pedestal base (referred to as a stepped 'calvary'). There are references to the slabs from the 13th century being carved in relief, contrasting with those of the 12th century being more commonly incised.

The Newick Parish Magazine for December 1964 includes an article by the rector Gordon E Diamond explaining that, in the churchyard, a new pipe had been laid connecting the church to the mains water supply. The article, as quoted below, provides illuminating details about finding the smaller of the two grave slabs, and placing it, in 1964, in its current position:

'The workmen, in the process of digging a trench for the water pipe across the north side of the churchyard, uncovered a gravestone which I felt was of great age. I consulted Mr F Bentham-Stevens, who for forty-five years was secretary of the Sussex Archaeological Society. Mr Bentham Stevens told me that he felt that my idea that the stone is 13th century is correct. We are both convinced that the stone originally marked a grave where the tower now stands. We also believe that workmen in the 15th century clearing the ground to build the tower removed a great deal of earth, including this stone, to the north side, and the stone became buried until we found it. You may have noticed that the ground on the north side of the church near the main gate and tower is much higher than the other part of the churchyard. We have placed the gravestone near the west porch on the tower side alongside a similar stone at the foot of the 11th century nave wall. We think this stone

also was originally where the tower now stands. All this is a link with the past and is most interesting'

At the parish church of Isfield, 2½ miles to the south-east of Newick, is a full-length stone grave slab (photo below) of very similar appearance to the larger of the Newick slabs. This slab is illustrated in the book 'A Short History of Sepulchral Cross Slabs' by K E Styan (1902) and is described as follows:

'A raised cross slab of the thirteenth century now resting in an upright position in the exterior of the south chancel wall...the base of the stone is broken away and the surface throughout is much defaced, but enough can be traced to show that the sculpturing is characteristic of that century'



The Isfield slab in 2017 and as illustrated in 1902

Another medieval grave slab is inside St Gile's church, Horsted Keynes, which has some similarities to the Newick and Isfield slabs (see photograph below). The booklet, *A History of St Giles Church, Horsted Keynes* by Canon John Twisleton, refers to '*...the Lord Priors of Lewes, whose records speak of a chapel here at St Giles in 1312.*' The slab is therefore referred to as the 'Prior's tomb cover'.



Prior's tomb cover at Horsted Keynes

Newick, as well as Horsted Keynes, had significant associations with Lewes Priory in these medieval times, as explained in the classic Sussex history books *The History, Antiquities and Topography of the County of Sussex* by T W Horsfield 1835 (volume 2, pages 223-224) and the *Victoria History of the County of Sussex* 1940 (page 89). Perhaps one or both of the slabs at Newick were of a person associated with the priory?

There are other medieval cross slabs in Sussex, including in churches and church yards, close to Newick. One at St Peter's church in Chailey, in the churchyard by the east wall of the church, has a tapered shape, 145cm long, 25 cm thick, chamfered edges with the sculpted cross (detail shown below), of similar design to the Newick slab. Two slabs at Fletching churchyard have a very crumbly surface so the sculpturing is very eroded. The above mentioned 1902 book by K E Styan refers to examples at Little Horsted, East Dean, Westham and in other parts of the country.



Grave slab detail at Chailey

Are the Newick slabs 'crusader's graves' ?

There are references to 'crusaders' graves in Sussex.

Below, is a photograph of a full-length stone grave slab on the red tiles of the south aisle in Saint Nicholas's church, Pevensey. The cross, shaft and pedestal, carved in relief, have similarities to that on the Newick slab. This Pevensey slab was one of two found during the 19th century restoration of the church. It is described in the 2017 church guide as '...likely to have covered the grave of an early incumbent or wealthy parishioner', but it is of interest that on the information label lying on the slab and also in a church leaflet it is described as 'crusaders tomb' or 'crusaders coffin cover' of the 12th or 13th century. Is there any evidence of it being a crusaders tomb?



Grave slab at Pevensey, Sussex

In the booklet *A History of St Giles Church, Horsted Keynes* by Canon John Twisleton, referred to earlier, there is reference to a crusader as follows:

'A most interesting feature of St Giles is the diminutive recumbent statue of a knight in the recess in the north wall before the high altar. Dated about 1270, its size suggests a heart shrine. When crusaders died abroad their mummified hearts were sometimes

brought back for burial. Somewhere under the chancel may lie the encased heart of a Cahaigues family crusader...the Domesday book says Horsted Keynes was in the keeping of William de Cahignes (who fought at Hastings 1066), hence Horsted Keynes'

Below, is a modern photograph of the Horsted Keynes shrine with its little recumbent statue of a knight.



Crusader's shrine at Horsted Keynes

In the 13th century medieval period, only the clergy or the most distinguished members of society would have a grave slab of stone, which would usually be inside the church. Parishioner's graves in the churchyard would normally have had no permanent markers. It is reasonable to conclude that the Newick slabs would be of high status individuals, probably 13th century. The slabs may well have originally been inside the old church and later moved out during alterations or simply when the slabs were looking too worn to be appropriate inside the building.

But is there evidence that they were for noble crusaders rather than of clergy/priors/priest? Knights killed in the holy land crusades were usually buried in that country rather than having the problem of bringing bodies back on a long journey to this country for a home burial. Some knights might have just their heart or their bones brought back for burial in which case a full length grave would be unnecessary. One of the web sites referred to earlier states that '...half-size slabs also existed...' Crusaders could of course be buried, having died of natural causes in this country, after their successful return from wars abroad.

It could be considered surprising that, if the Newick grave slabs are of crusaders, there is no more definite local record of their names as significant residents of this little country parish. It is possible that the slabs may have originally had metal inlay to indicate the names. Or is this lack of a name perhaps because, as an act of humility, some crusaders graves did not have names inscribed/recorded?

One archaeologist suggests that the iconography of the slabs looks ecclesiastical rather than secular, and therefore a high-status

priest or the like is much more likely... would expect a secular grave to have a more secular scheme, such as a sword.

So, how accurate is the description 'crusaders' grave for the Newick slab/slabs? There appears to be little solid evidence. Has it grown from a mere suggested possibility into a much repeated fact? It is remarkable how quickly a suggestion or rumour can become a recognised part of established local culture. Further research could continue, to try to bring further light upon the subject.

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Information Sources;

St Mary's church literature.... *St Mary's Church, Newick - History and Guide* published in 1958, revised 1987; leaflets providing condensed history and features of the church

Various web sites referring to 'cross slab grave covers', particularly in Lancashire, Yorkshire and Gloucestershire

A Short History of Sepulchral Cross Slabs by K E Styan (1902)

The History, Antiquities and Topography of the County of Sussex by T W Horsfield 1835 (volume 2, pages 223-224)

Victoria History of the County of Sussex 1940 (page 89).

Newick Parish Magazine December 1964

Drawings of the Newick grave slabs as measured by author in July 2017. The photograph of the graves shows annual remembrance crosses which have been laid on the top of the slabs

A Newick Alphabet (1998) comprising a coloured, single page of illustrations by Peggy Awes, showing in alphabetical order the significant features in Newick parish, includes a little drawing of 'Tomb said to be a Crusader's'

Photographs at Newick, Isfield, Chailey, Horsted Keynes and Pevensey by the author

Church guides of Horsted Keynes and Pevensey

Comments from professional archaeologists Simon Stevens and Dr Michael Shapland

Gravestones, Tombs and Memorials by Trevor Yorke (2010) is an illustrated, easy-to-read, 64-page book, which includes paragraphs on medieval grave slabs.

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