

From the 300th Anniversary Committee

THE CELTIC CROSS AT OLD WYE CHURCH

The Celtic Cross at Old Wye Church is a standing cross made of oak timber, rising on its stone base to an overall height of seven feet. Our Cross was erected in the meadow at Old Wye little more than a decade ago, but its story and the traditions it represents are many centuries old – much older even than Old Wye Church itself, now celebrating its 300th anniversary.



The Tradition of Standing Crosses

Standing crosses first appeared in the seventh century A.D. in Britain and Ireland. Christianity had long since come to the Roman province of Britannia, and by the early fourth century, after Constantine had put an end to persecution of Christians in the Empire, an organized British Church was sending bishops to wider church councils on the Continent. But all that was swept away in the early fifth century, when the Roman legions left Britain and pagan Saxon invaders arrived from Germany to take over Britannia. Christianity only returned in the sixth and seventh centuries when Christian missionaries from Ireland and Rome converged on and converted Saxon Britain. It was the Irish missionaries who introduced, from their 563 A.D. entry point at Iona in the Hebrides, the standing crosses – specifically, the “Celtic cross” -- that eventually spread all over Britain.

Celtic crosses, with their characteristic central circle joining and bracing the arms of the cross, were typically erected outdoors, near churches or monasteries, or at crossroads or boundary points. Like our Cross, the early ones were made



out of wood, though those that have survived are the later ones made out of stone.

One of the best preserved of the early Celtic crosses is an eight-foot high stone cross, c. 750, in a churchyard on the Hebridean island of Islay in Scotland. As with other stone standing crosses, the east and west faces of the cross are carved, and probably were painted, with decorations and images of Biblical scenes.

The Story of the Wye Oak



Our Celtic Cross at Old Wye Church is made of wood from the Wye Oak, the famous tree that for centuries stood two hundred yards to the north of the Church. The acorn that produced the Wye Oak fell to the ground in the early sixteenth century, at the time of the Protestant Reformation in Europe and the first Book of Common Prayer in England. The Oak grew in a clearing beside the long Indian footpath known to the first English settlers as the Choptank Trail. Beside the trail, at the head of the Wye East River, some of these settlers erected in the seventeenth century the wooden predecessor of the Old Wye Church.

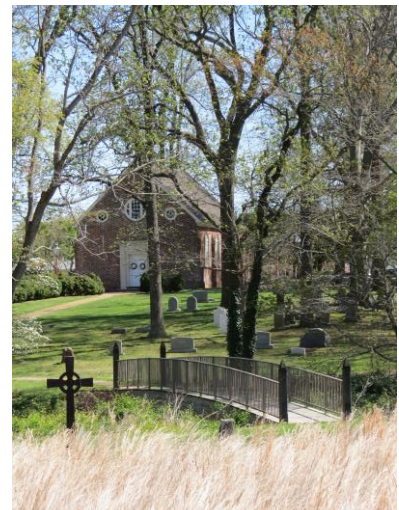
By 1721, when today's Old Wye was built in brick on the site of the deteriorating wooden church, the Wye Oak was already a mighty tree almost two hundred years old. Having grown up in a clearing and thus not hemmed in by other trees, it developed a short trunk and heavy lower limbs that were unsuitable for timber and saved it from the nearby sawmills. Instead, standing as it did beside an increasingly-used route connecting the Eastern Shore from the head of Chesapeake near Elkton to the plantation port of Cambridge, the Oak found itself sheltering a tavern and country store serving travelers and the bustling commercial center of Wye Mills.

The Wye Oak received no professional care, despite its growing fame as a giant of its kind, until the early twentieth century, and that only came about by accident (or providence). In 1914, a parishioner of Wye Parish, DeCourcy W. Thom, was having work done on some of the huge oaks then standing in the Old Wye churchyard. He sent his hired tree expert over to give the even bigger Oak a course of repair, pruning, and feeding. That expert, one H. Stevenson Clopper, became the Oak's champion and caregiver for the next 35 years. In 1939 the State of Maryland acquired the Oak and thereafter presided over its slow decline, including the loss of major lower limbs, until it finally crashed to the ground in a violent storm on June 6, 2002.

The Making of the Old Wye Celtic Cross

As soon as the giant Oak fell, its wood was much in demand for a variety of worldly uses (notably, a desk for the Governor). Wye Parish was fortunate in being able to secure from the State a piece of the Oak large enough to be fashioned into a standing cross of the size of the ancient British originals. The Parish adopted the Celtic design prepared by Graham Landscape Architecture of Annapolis; the wood from the Oak was held for seasoning and eventual milling by the firm of A. E. Walbridge of Easton; and craftsmen from Stevensville and Centreville supplied the iron fittings and stone pedestal.

The whole process took considerable time and patience, but seven years later, in 2009, all was finally ready. A rugged Celtic cross, fashioned from the wood of a historic tree, was now on the grounds of Old Wye Church. The Cross was erected in the meadow opposite the Church, across the branch of the Wye East River by which, in 1721, congregants had come in boats to their new chapel. Now, after three hundred years, Old Wye congregants could walk to their new cross, over a gracefully arching footbridge above the ravine that encloses the thin stream to which the ancient waterway has dwindled.



What remained to be done was only the performance of a proper Service of Dedication and Thanksgiving. That service, led by the Bishop of the Diocese of Easton and the Rector of Wye Parish, joined in by members and friends of the Parish, was held on Sunday, September 27, 2009. It was the first of what would be many subsequent occasions of reflection and devotion, both congregational and private, at the foot of an increasingly cherished emblem of our rich Christian heritage, the Old Wye Celtic Cross.

Written by Jim Campbell
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