Undoubtedly, the most significant event in Harby's history happened over 700 years ago on the evening of November 28th 1290 at the home of Richard de Weston when Queen Eleanor, Queen consort of Edward I died of a "slow fever". Earthworks in the field to the west of All Saints Church and (inaccurate) annotation on Ordnance Survey maps of "*Queen Eleanor's Palace*" are all that remain of this historic site, though the story is recounted on an information board near the church. King Edward was grief-stricken at her death and his beloved queen was commemorated in no fewer than three tombs and twelve memorial crosses, with probably the greatest funerary display of any English monarch or consort.


Queen Eleanor

Eleanor of Castile

Eleanor of Castile was born c1244, the youngest daughter of Ferdinand III of Castile and his second wife, Jeanne of Ponthieu. King Ferdinand died in 1252 and Alfonso X ,*"The Learned"*, became King of Castile who, with King Henry III, arranged the marriage of his half-sister, Eleanor, to the young Prince Edward, the king's eldest son and heir to the English throne. They were married in October 1254 at the convent church of Las Hueglas in Spain; Edward was fifteen and Eleanor little more than ten years old. Like most medieval royal marriages, theirs had been politically motivated but history remembers the marriage of Edward and Eleanor as an enduring example of conjugal love. Eleanor is eulogised as a model of virtuous womanhood and in their 36 year marriage Eleanor had 16 children, only six of whom survived childhood, including the future Edward II born in 1284, their 14th child and last of four sons.

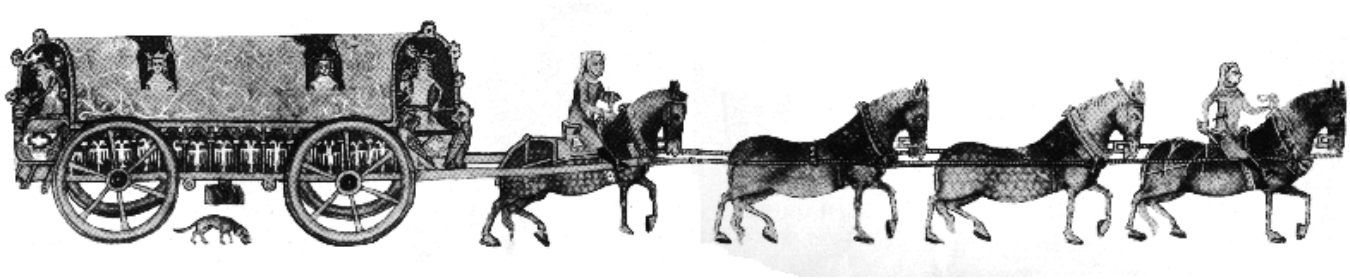
Following their marriage, Eleanor first came to England in 1255 and established a home with her husband at Windsor Castle in February 1263 where she remained until after the Battle of Lewes. On 18th June 1264 King Henry III was forced by the barons and Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester to command her departure, so she fled to France where she remained until after the Battle of Evesham, returning to England in October 1265.

In August 1270 Edward and Eleanor left England for the fifth crusade to the Holy Land where the Prince distinguished himself as an inspirational leader and military strategist. In 1271 Edward and Eleanor arrived in Acre with the crusader army weakened by disease. Already sick, Edward survived an attack by an assassin sent by the Emir of Joppa bearing letters of his conversion to Christianity. Edward was stabbed with a poisoned dagger but overpowered and killed his assailant. The sides of Edward's wound were carefully pared apart by his surgeons to arrest the progress of the venom, though apocryphal accounts of Eleanor sucking the poison from the wound are romances of later writers.

Eleanor miscarried the child she was carrying at Acre in 1271 though a year later, Joan *"of Acre"* was born. Shortly afterwards news reached the Holy Land that King Henry III had died on November 16th 1272 and Edward was now King of England. Despite this news, Edward and Eleanor returned to England almost a year later via Italy where they met the Pope in February 1273. Edward travelled to Paris while Eleanor visited her family in Castile. They eventually landed at Dover on August 2nd 1274 and returned to Westminster. On Sunday August 19th 1274, King Edward I and Queen Eleanor were crowned in Westminster Abbey.

In 1280 King Edward I and Queen Eleanor, accompanied by their five surviving children, visited Lincoln for the consecration of the "Angel Choir", newly built to accommodate the shrine of Saint Hugh of Lincoln. During the winter of 1285/6 Eleanor suffered her first episode of the illness that recurred each winter and seemingly led to her death five years later (most probably tuberculosis of the lungs). During the period of her deteriorating health, Eleanor had already begun planning for her own death; she ordered images for her tomb and arranged with the Black Friars of London to receive her heart.

In July 1290 the court celebrated the marriage of 18-year-old Joan of Acre to the Earl of Gloucester and the betrothal of six year old Prince Edward to seven year old Margaret, Queen of Scotland. Edward and Eleanor left Westminster in late July for a northern tour via Northampton, Nottingham and on to the Royal Hunting Lodge at Clipstone in Sherwood Forest. On 28th September, the Queen's physician, Leopardus, was summoned and on October 28th 'syrups and other medicines for her use' were purchased from Lincoln, suggesting that she had once more succumbed to her winter illness.



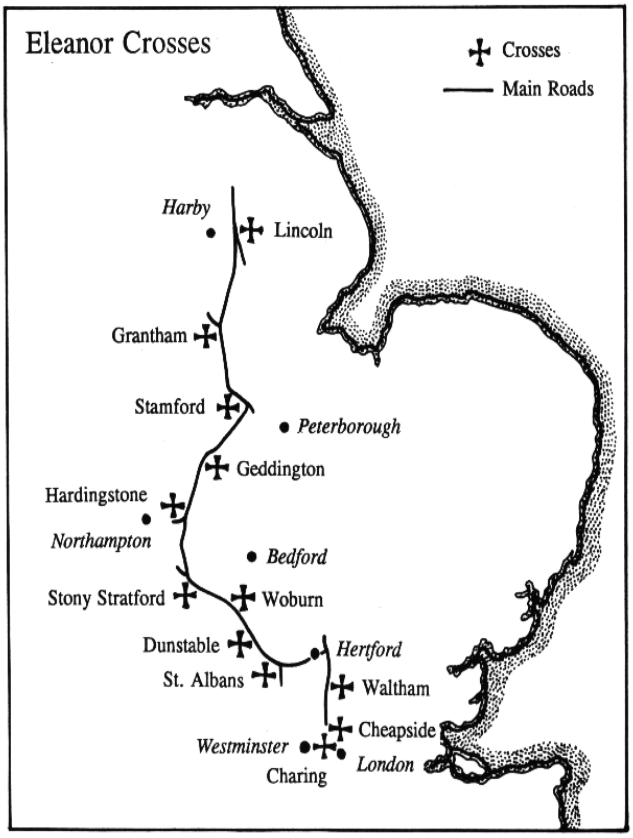
By November 13th the Queen's health was obviously failing and the court left Clipstone heading for Lincoln, possibly intending to visit the shrine of St.Hugh to pray for her recovery. However, on November 20th, Eleanor was brought to the manor house of Richard de Weston in Harby suffering from a '*slow fever*' and in the ensuing days her health deteriorated rapidly. The local priest, William de Kelm, and the Bishop of Lincoln, Oliver Sutton, were at her deathbed when she died during the evening of November 28th 1290.

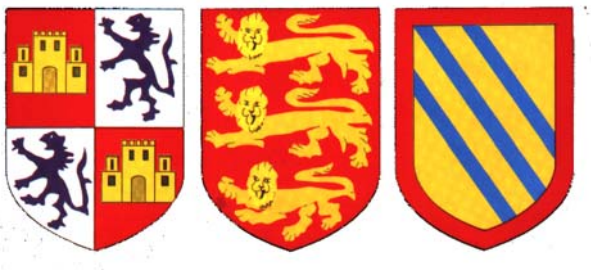
Her body was taken to the Gilbertine priory of St.Catherines in Lincoln where she was eviscerated and embalmed. Her viscera were interred in the Chapel of St.Mary in Lincoln Cathedral and her body and heart started the long journey to London. On the morning of December 4th, on the first and longest stage of the 172-mile journey to Westminster Abbey, the cortège set off on medieval roads in the short daylight hours of December. The 12 places the cortège stopped at were afterwards marked by commemorative crosses to her memory, and Edward I established a chantry chapel at Harby to pray for the Queen's soul. After her death King Edward I wrote "*I loved her dearly during her lifetime …… I shall not cease to love her now that she is dead*".

The chantry chapel at Harby was consecrated by the Archbishop of York in 1294 and its first incumbent, Roger de Newton, was paid ten marks a year and the manor of Navenby given to provide for its maintenance. The chantry survived until 1548. Possibly the 'barn-like' building which preceded the current church built in 1876 incorporated parts of the chapel though no stonework of this period survives in All Saints Church. The east face of the tower has a statue of Eleanor in a canopied niche flanked by the arms of Castile, England and Ponthieu, and the brass plate by the altar rail is inaccurately inscribed with "*Here died Eleanor of Castile, Queen of England. November 27th AD 1290*".

The Eleanor Crosses

On his return journey from the crusade in 1271, Edward I had seen the crosses erected between St.Denis and Paris following the death of Louis IX and may have been inspired by this example. The end of the 13th Century saw an architectural transition from *Early English* to *Decorated* Gothic and the crosses were constructed in a style reflecting this, broadly the same design with similar decoration but some variation in plan. Each cross has three diminishing stages, the lower tier being adorned with the arms of Castile, England and Ponthieu, the middle tier with repeated statues of Eleanor, all surmounted by a decorated pinnacle. Master masons Roger Crundale, his brother Richard Crundale, Nicholas Dymenge and John of Battle supervised the construction of most of the crosses but the Geddington Cross is unusual in design. William of Ireland and Alexander of Abingdon were the sculptors of most of the figures of Eleanor that adorn the middle tiers. There is no suggestion that Harby ever had a cross and only three of the original twelve crosses remain, at Geddington, Northampton and Waltham.



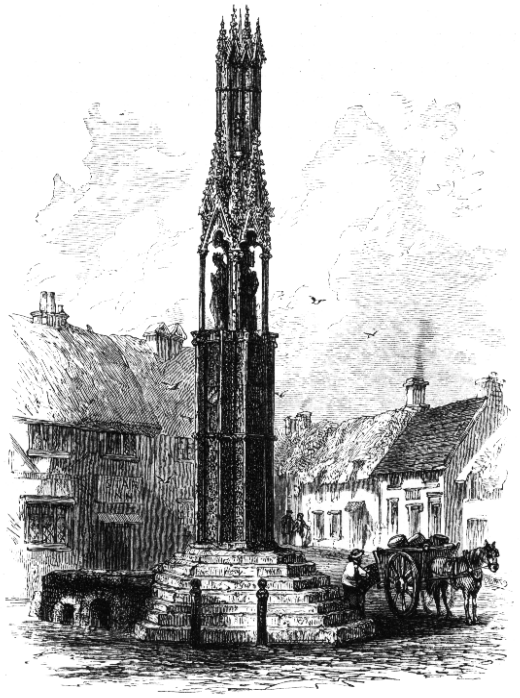


Lyon & Castile England Ponthieu

Lincoln Cross was erected at 'Swine Green' near St.Catherine's Priory, in an area still known as St Catherine's at the foot of Cross-o-cliff Hill, and was a well-known landmark for centuries. Records show that it was repaired by the City authorities in 1624, though it was destroyed during The Civil War about 20 years later. A fragment of a statue of Eleanor was rescued from its use as a footbridge in the 19th century and can now be seen in the Castle grounds.

Grantham Cross stood on what is now St.Peter's Hill on the High Street, little is known of its appearance. Its fate was similar to most of the other lost crosses : it was destroyed by Colonel Rossiter's Parliamentary garrison in 1645 and the stone removed for building material.

Stamford Cross was described in 1645 as similar in appearance to the surviving crosses at Northampton and Waltham but was demolished some time before 1659. Its site is traditionally held to be in Scotgate where 'The Clock House' now stands.

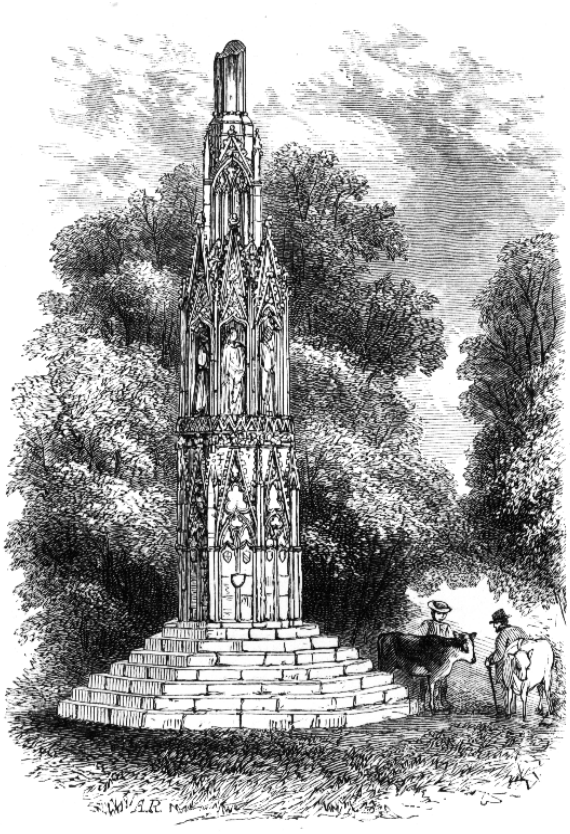


Geddington Cross.

Geddington had a Royal Hunting Lodge in Rockingham Forest in 1290 and though few traces of this remain today, the village has one of the three remaining crosses. Some opinions suggest that the Geddington Cross is the work of a mason 'Garcia of Spain' as it is so different to the other remaining crosses and surviving illustrations of Cheapside and Charing. It is triangular in plan and rises gracefully to a height of 42 feet. The tiers are arranged as the other crosses but it is more richly ornamented and more *Decorated* in style. Having survived The Civil War unscathed, the cross was damaged in the 18th century during the Easter 'sport' of squirrel-baiting, where the unfortunate animals were tormented by stone-throwing locals, some taking refuge in the cross. Geddington Cross is arguably the finest but certainly the most enigmatic of the three surviving crosses.

Northampton Cross was erected in the parish of Hardingstone as the Eleanor's cortège stopped overnight at the nearby Delapre Abbey. The cross is much repaired and lost its top as early as 1460 but is still a marvellous example of late 13th century work. Of octagonal plan, it has the unique feature of an open book carved on four alternating sides of the lower tier.

Stony Stratford Cross was the work of John of Battle and although few accounts of it survive, it was probably similar to the surviving crosses at Northampton and Waltham. It was destroyed during The Civil War but a modern building on the site bears a commemorative plaque.



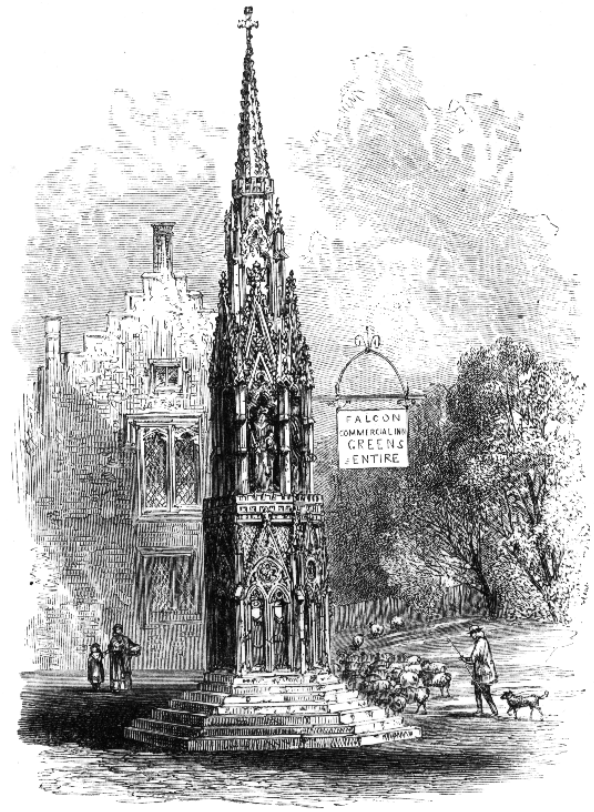
Northampton Cross.

Woburn Cross was another casualty of The Civil War and nothing is known of its location.

Dunstable Priory provided accommodation for the overnight stay of the funeral cortège in 1290 and a site for the cross was chosen the following morning, in the market place where Watling Street meets Ickneild Way near the entrance to Church Street. Heavy traffic now thunders over the site of the cross that was demolished by the Parliamentarian troops of the Earl of Essex in 1643.

St.Albans Abbey received the Queen's body for the night of 13th December 1290 where the bier was placed before the high altar of the monastery "*where it was during the whole night honoured with sacred offices performed with the utmost devotion*". The last of John of Battle's five crosses stood in the High Street near where the clock tower now stands. It survived at least until 1640 and its base until 1702 though a year later the site had been cleared. A plaque on the 15th century Clock Tower commemorates the site.

Waltham Cross still stands, much restored and with a well-documented history. Architecturally, it follows the same design as the cross at Northampton and the lost crosses of Cheapside and Charing in London, though more *Decorated* in style (adding to the enigma of the Geddington cross). Hexagonal in plan, it rises through diminishing stages of blind tracery with heraldic motifs, through a second tier of six elaborate pinnacled canopies. These house three statues of Eleanor in traditional pose by stonemason Alexander of Abingdon, to a third hexagonal tier of blind tracery surmounted by a cross. Waltham Cross has somehow miraculously survived more than 700 years of adversity including Civil War, encroachment by adjacent buildings, road schemes for turnpikes, the misguided intentions of Victorian restorations and bombs dropped during the Second World War. It has endured these ravages with dignity and not a little bit of good fortune as a memorial to Edward I's beloved queen.



Waltham Cross.

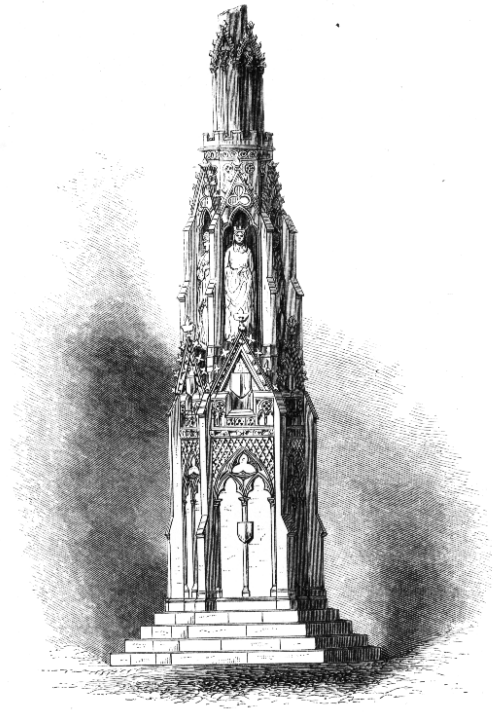
The funeral cortège of 1290 may have stayed two nights at Waltham and King Edward I certainly rode on ahead to prepare for the reception of Eleanor's body in London.

West Cheap (or Cheapside) Cross cost almost three times as much as the cross at Lincoln and was presumably a more lavish memorial. It was sited at the west end of Cheapside opposite Wood Street and by the 15th century was in a sorry state of disrepair despite remedial work in 1441 and 1485. Three successive crosses have occupied the site with subsequent structures more elaborately adorned with religious images. Inevitably, such a potent symbol of the monarchy and Catholicism was repeatedly damaged and defaced during the iconoclastic excesses of the 16th and 17th centuries.

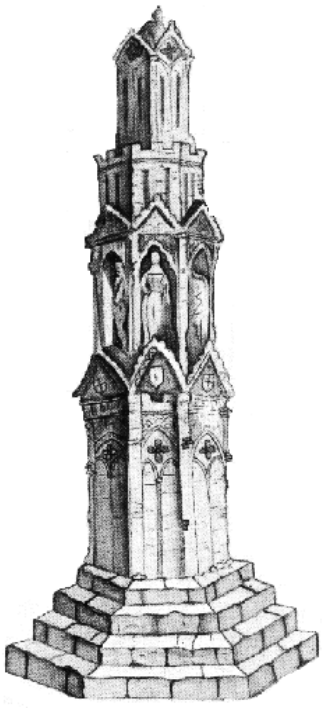
The destruction of Cheapside Cross in 1643

"*On 2nd May 1643, Sir Robert Harlow with a troop of horse and two companies of foot in support finally toppled the Cheapside cross*" – seemingly watched by a large and jubilant crowd. Two fragments of the lower panels from the original cross survive in the London Museum.

Charing Cross was the work of master mason, Richard Crundale, and described as being the finest and stateliest of all the Eleanor crosses, occupying a prominent position about 200 yards from the cross by Edward Barry erected in 1863 outside Charing Cross station. Barry based his design on what was known of the original cross; an octagonal plan with eight statues of Eleanor. The site at the junction of Whitehall and Trafalgar Square is now occupied by a statue of Charles I. Victorian historians suggest that the name Charing is derived from "*chere reine*" meaning "*beloved queen"* though contemporary opinions disagree. Like Cheapside Cross, its destruction was ordered in 1643 though it appears to have survived until 1647. Ironically, its eventual demise was lamented rather than celebrated, satirised in a ballad "The Downfall of Charing Cross" from Percy's Reliques



Charing Cross, from the Crowle Collection, British Museum.



Undone, undone the lawyers are
They wander about the towne:
Nor can find the way to Westminster
Now Charing Cross is downe:
At the end of the Strand they make a stand
Swearing they are at a loss,
And chaffing, say, that's not the way
They must go by Charing Cross. etc.

Bishop Oliver Sutton of Lincoln who had been at her bedside when the Queen died in Harby performed the final ceremony in Westminster Abbey on December 17th 1290. Eleanor's body was interred in the chapel of Edward the Confessor by the tomb of Henry III. Both gilded bronze statues were the work of goldsmith, William Torel, and were probably the first examples of life-size bronze casting in England. The marble tomb on which the statue rests is the work of Richard Crundale and her last memorial is equal to the artistic achievements of the crosses. It has thankfully survived the same adversities and remains one of the great medieval monuments in England, fulfilling the intentions of Edward I over 700 years later.

His solace all was reft sith she was from him gone
On fell things he thought, and waxed heavy as lead
For sadness him o'ermastered since Eleanor was dead

Piers Langtoft.

Detail of Queen Eleanor from her tomb in Westminster Abbey

Compiled by Richard Croft richard@htcharby.fsnet.co.uk

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