

Queen Eleanor of Castile

Waltham Cross hosts one of the three surviving medieval crosses that mark the route of the funeral procession of Queen Eleanor of Castile. They stand centuries on from their construction soon after Queen Eleanor's death in 1290, as a mourning King's remembrance of his beloved wife.

Twelve crosses were constructed to mark the overnight stops of the funeral cortege on a procession from Lincoln to Westminster Abbey in London. Her husband, King Edward I of England also ordered the staging of a grand funeral and an elaborate anniversary service at Westminster Abbey. This monument added the word Cross to the town of Waltham and places it as an important memorial site to a woman who led an extraordinary royal life.

The future Queen Eleanor was born in 1241 in Burgos, the historical capital of Castile, in modern Spain, the first daughter of King Ferdinand III of Castile and Joan Countess of Ponthieu. In 1254 aged 13, she married the 15 year old future King Edward I of England as a political peace arrangement involving the Duchy of Gascony in the south of Aquitaine, France.

In 1255 they moved to England and lived in the court of King Henry III. Eleanor supported her husband during the Second Barons War (1264 -1267) which pitted a number of Barons against Royalist forces fighting in the name of Henry III. She aided in the defence of Windsor Castle until June 1264 when the royalist army was defeated at the Battle of Lewes. She was taken prisoner and confined at Westminster Palace until the Battle of Evesham in 1265 after which she aided her husband in reforming the government.

In 1274 Edward and Eleanor were crowned King and Queen of England after the death of Henry III. The couple was rarely apart and evidence shows they were devoted to each other. During their 36 year marriage they had 16 children, 6 of who survived into adulthood.

Queen Eleanor died in 1290 aged 49 in Harby, Leicestershire and was taken to St Catherine's Priory in Lincoln where she was embalmed. She had planned for her death and wished for her heart to be buried at the abbey church at the London Dominicans priory at Blackfriars. Her other organs were buried in Lincoln Cathedral and then the funeral procession transported her body to Westminster Abbey to be buried at the feet of Henry III.

Today only three monuments remain intact— Geddington, Hardingstone and Waltham Cross.

The Crosses were erected at the following locations:

Lincoln - this represents the start of the funeral procession that took 12 days to reach Westminster Abbey in London. The original cross stood at St. Catherine's an area at the end of Lincoln's High Street. Today the remains of the cross can be seen in the grounds of Lincoln Castle.

Grantham - nothing survives, but records suggest that the monument featured Eleanor's coats of arms.

Stamford - only a small marble fragment survives of this monument, a carved rose, is currently preserved in Stamford Museum. It stylistically resembled the Geddington Cross. The new millennium was marked by the erection of a modern monument inspired by the original, but rather than standing in the original location thought to be Scotgate, it now stands in Sheepmarket. The carved detail is based upon the fragment in the museum.

Geddington - this monument is the best preserved of the three remaining. It is 42 ft high and made of local stone set on eight steps. It is triangular in shape, taller than the others with a slender profile.

Hardingstone - This cross is still standing at the edge of Delapré Abbey, on the outskirts of the village. The cross is octagonal in shape and was built in three tiers. The cross was replaced in 1713 when a sundial was added. During works in 1840 a replacement cross was added. This has now broken and just the shaft remains.

Stony Stratford - this cross stood at the lower end of the town on the old roman Watling Street which is now the High Street. It is thought to have been a similar style to the one at Geddington and was destroyed in the Civil War. A commemorative plaque in the High Street states "Near this spot stood the Cross erected by King Edward the I to mark the place in Stony Stratford where the body of Queen Eleanor rested on its way from Harby in Nottinghamshire to Westminster Abbey in 1290".

Woburn - the location of this cross is not known.

Dunstable - this cross was constructed at Church Street, a site where local people mourned while Eleanor's coffin was guarded in Dunstable priory. A modern cross statue, constructed in her honour, now stands in a shopping precinct in the High Street called Eleanor Precinct.

St Albans - the cross was constructed in the Market Place. It was damaged during the Civil War and demolished in the 18th Century to be replaced by a town pump. This was later replaced by a fountain.

Waltham Cross - this cross was constructed in 1294. Though the cross has undergone restoration it remains true to its original design. The statues of Eleanor were replaced with replicas during its restoration in the 1950's, but can still be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

West Cheap (now known as Cheapside) - it is believed this monument looked similar to the Waltham Cross and Hardingstone crosses and is believed to have been about 20ft high. Fragments are held by the Museum of London. The cross had major restoration under Henry VI, but was demolished in May 1643 following an order from Parliament. It is believed to have contained religious statutes and was seen as the embodiment of Royal Catholic tradition. At least one riot tried to prevent its destruction, but it was finally pulled down in 1647.

Charing Cross - the original monument was built at the top of Whitehall on the south side of Trafalgar Square, but was destroyed in 1647 during the Civil War under order of Parliament. It was replaced by a statue of Charles I in 1675 following the restoration. The monument constructed at Charing Cross in front of the railway station was built in 1865 to publicise the hotel at Charing Cross Station. It is more ornate than the original and stands at 21 metres high. Charing Cross was the final resting place on the route and was the most expensive monument, built of marble.