

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC158

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90234)

Taken into State care: 1955 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2012

**HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

ORMISTON MARKET CROSS



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

ORMISTON MARKET CROSS

SYNOPSIS

Ormiston Cross stands in the centre of the pretty, early 18th-century planned village of Ormiston. However, the cross is much older – probably c.1450, so making it one of the few pre-Reformation mercat crosses surviving in Scotland. Mercat crosses were an essential feature of a burgh or village, being a place for public addresses, the proceedings of law and a focal point for market events. Given that Ormiston was granted its right to hold a market only in 1669, it must be questioned whether the cross originally served as a mercat cross.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- c.1450 – the first mention of the lands and village of 'Ormistoun' in the records. The style of the mercat cross conforms to this date.
- 1669 – Ormiston obtains its rights to hold a market.
- c.1735 - the present village layout is formally created by John Cockburn of Ormiston. It is possible that the cross is re-erected on its present site around that date.
- 1955 - the cross is entrusted into state care.

Archaeological Overview:

- No documented archaeological work has taken place here. Such an investigation may conceivably show whether or not the cross is on its original site.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

- The cross is complete. Carved from sandstone, it has a monolithic shaft, square in section with chamfered edges. On its west face is a shield in relief; this was probably formerly painted with the arms of the landowner. At the top of the shaft is an equal-armed cross-head with roll- and hollow- mouldings.
- The original base is octagonally shaped.
- The cross and base stand on a pedestal of three steps (not original), and the whole is surrounded by a railed enclosure.
- The staples to which law-breakers were attached can still be seen on the shaft.

Social Overview:

- The mercat cross is a notable landmark in the centre of Main Street, in this pretty planned town.

- Once a thriving agricultural village, and latterly a coal-mining community, today Ormiston is a fairly quiet place, much used by those commuting to larger centres in East Lothian or to Edinburgh.
- The cross serves as a device by which to identify town and location, and is part of the imagery of the town online. Other than that, it seems not to have a specific purpose.

Spiritual Overview:

- It is possible that the mercat cross may have been used on occasion to proclaim religious announcements (eg, the passing of the Protestant Reformation Act).
- The head of the mercat cross actually incorporates a cross, which makes it highly unusual. It has been suggested that the cross may originally have stood outside a chapel that is known to have been sited close by.
- The mercat cross seems not to have any contemporary spiritual meaning, association or use.

Aesthetic Overview

- The cross is visually pleasing. Its base of three receding stages gives the slender verticality of the shaft cross a dramatic presence and weight. The small cross at the head provides a suitable 'finish'. The railing around seems not in the least obtrusive.
- The mercat cross is sited in the middle of Ormiston's Main Street, in an area of cobbled paving and grass, with little sign of modernity intruding, other than the cars parked around. The road runs alongside the cross on both sides, making it a very noticeable feature in the centre of the road. There are lots of trees along Main Street, and the cross is part of a long middle stretch of grass. The town is relatively quiet, adding to the cross's attractive aesthetic.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Is the cross on its original site, or was it moved to its present position when the planned village was created c.1735?
- Did it serve as a mercat cross in pre-Reformation times?

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- The cross is a rare example of a pre-Reformation mercat cross, and thus a precious architectural window into village culture in Lowland Scotland of the period.
- The mercat cross is also rare in that it has a cross-shaped head.
- Ormiston is a pretty planned village, and the mercat cross at its centre is a key element of its aesthetic.

Associated Properties

(*other pre-Reformation mercat crosses*) – **Merkland Cross; St. Peter's Cross, Duffus.**

(*other mercat crosses in East Lothian*) – Aberlady Cross; Gifford Cross; Musselburgh; **Preston Cross;** Wester Pencaitland

Keywords:

mercat (market); shaft

Selected Bibliography:

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