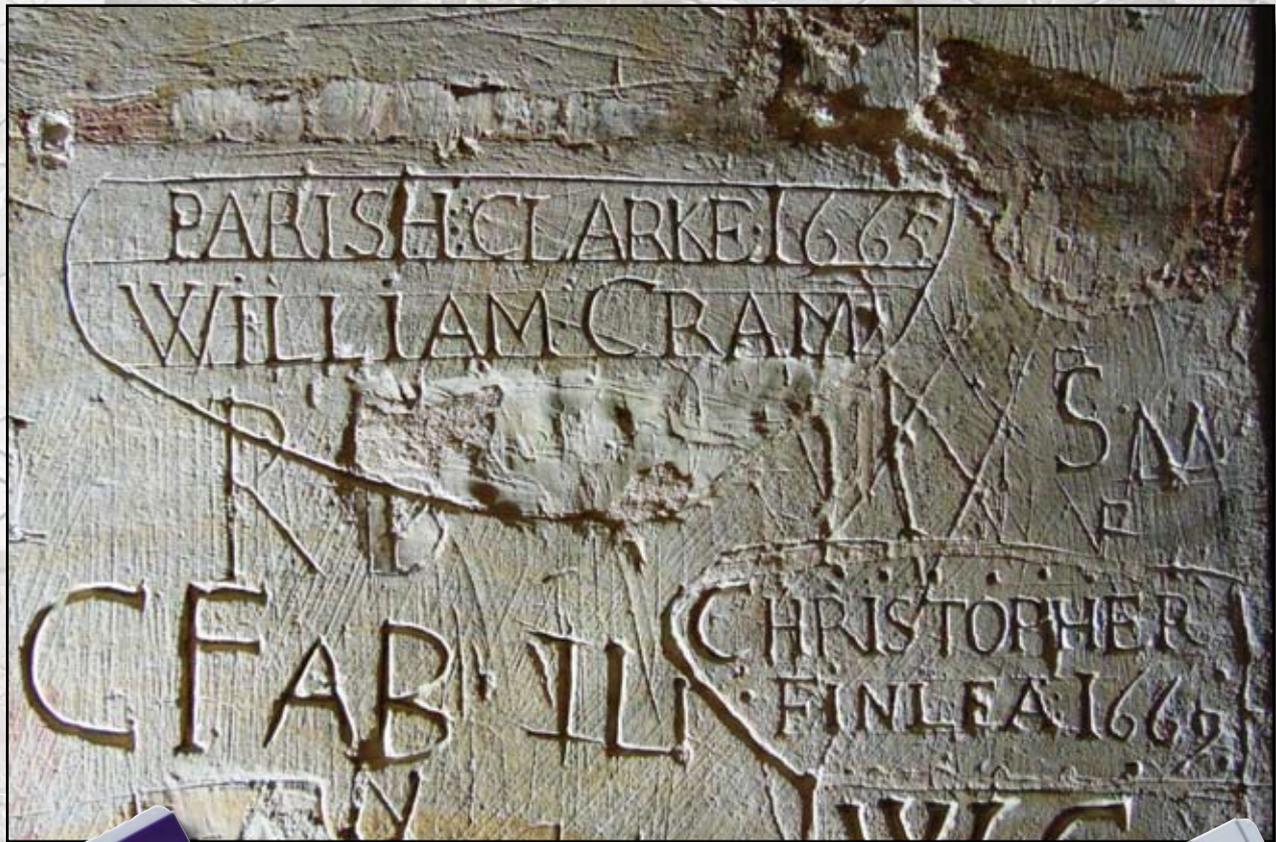


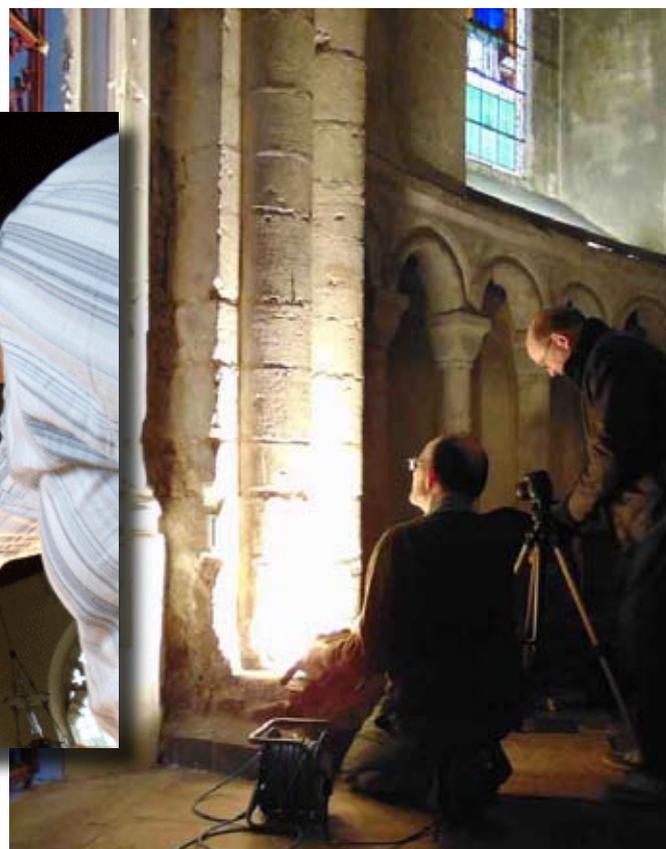
# Historic Graffiti: *Teacher's Notes*

Revised Oct. 2017



## Summary of the project

The Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey was established to undertake the very first large-scale and systematic survey of medieval church inscriptions in the UK. The project was entirely volunteer led, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, and surveyed over 650 surviving medieval churches. The survey resulted in the recording of over thirty thousand previously unknown inscriptions, and the project received national recognition in the form of a number of awards. The success of the Norfolk project led to the establishment of a large number of similar projects in other counties across the UK.





# CONTENTS

## Document Structure

This document contains background material on issues raised in the educational sheets produced as part of the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey. The educational sheets contain a number of historic graffiti related activities and subjects for group discussion and debate. This document contains a number of suggestions for guiding and expanding those discussions, and suggestions for a number of group activities. A short glossary and bibliography at the end of the document should enable group leaders and students to expand their study and debate in all areas of historic graffiti. The document is split into four main sections.

**Section 1:** Background - an introduction to the study of ancient graffiti, why we study it, and what it can tell us about the past.

**Section 2:** Interpretation - a summary of the main types of graffiti encountered in historic churches and other buildings, with a brief explanation of the meaning of each type.

**Section 3:** Suggested activities - a number of activities and discussion points for group or class participation.

**Section 4:** Additional Information - listing a number of sources for further information, a brief glossary of terms and a select bibliography of further reading.

Further information can be found on the project website

[www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk](http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk)

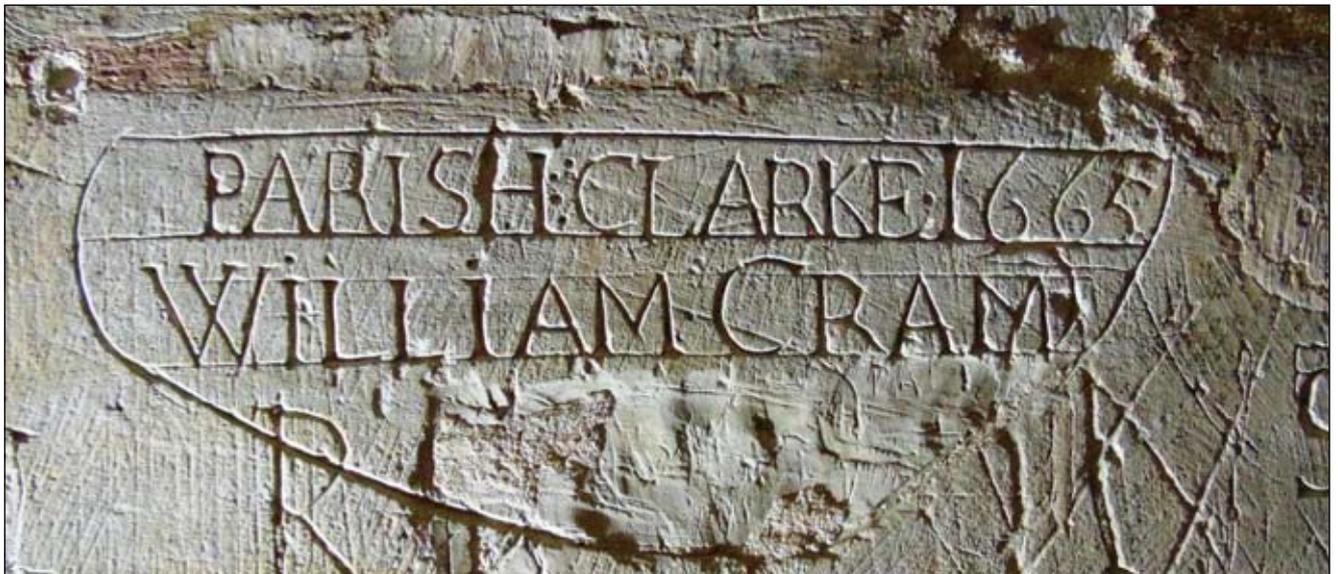


# Section 1:

## Why study graffiti?

Today graffiti is generally regarded as something that is destructive and anti-social. However, this is a relatively modern concept. Until very recent centuries graffiti was both accepted and acceptable, and visitors to historic sites and religious buildings across Europe had absolutely no problem with idea of 'leaving their mark'. The results of this can be seen on just about every cathedral, castle and ancient monument across Europe and beyond. In fact, the term 'graffiti' was only first used by archaeologists to describe the ancient informal inscriptions they were finding at Roman sites such as Pompeii in the 1850s. Before that time there wasn't even a word to describe these markings.

These early inscriptions are still regarded by some people as acts of mindless vandalism. However, they have also now become very much a part of the historical record in their own right. The inscriptions are a unique and personal insight into the lives of the people who visited these sites many hundreds of years ago - and can potentially tell us a very great deal.

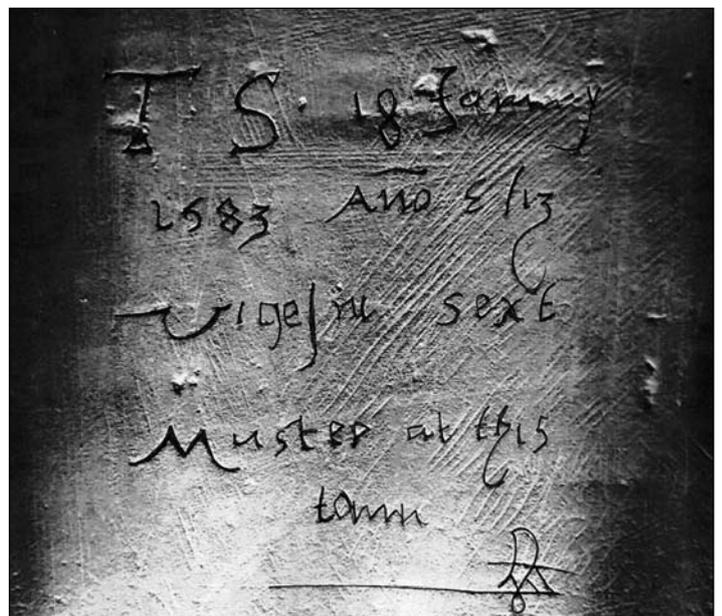


Above: Sedgeford, Norfolk

In some cases the graffiti can add to what we already know from other written records. For example, at Sedgeford in north-west Norfolk a graffiti inscription in the church records that William Cram was parish clerk in 1665 - the year of the 'great plague'. The documentary record tells us that Cram had been married six years prior to making the inscription, and was married again a few years later. However, none of the documents that survive mention his occupation, which is only found in the graffiti. And it isn't just information about the people that can be found in the graffiti. Sometimes it can tell us a great deal about the building it is found in. Information that simply exists nowhere else.

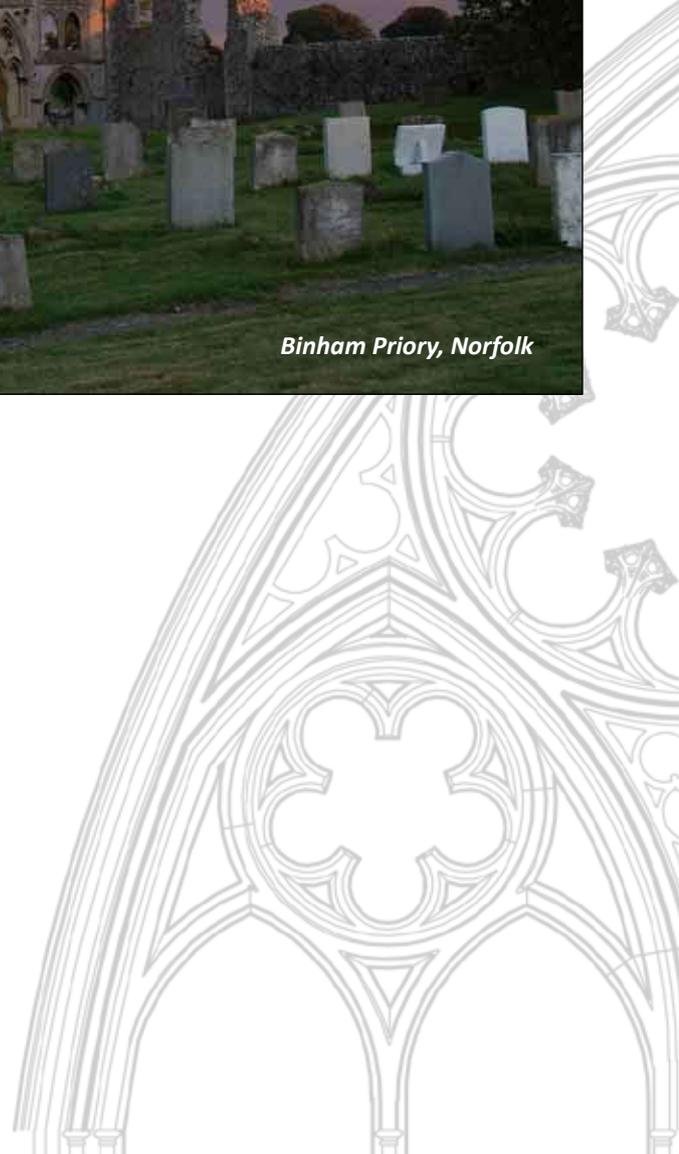
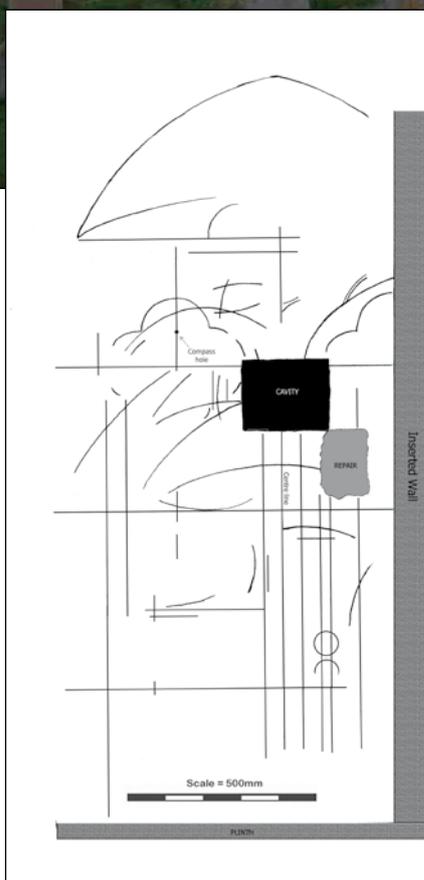
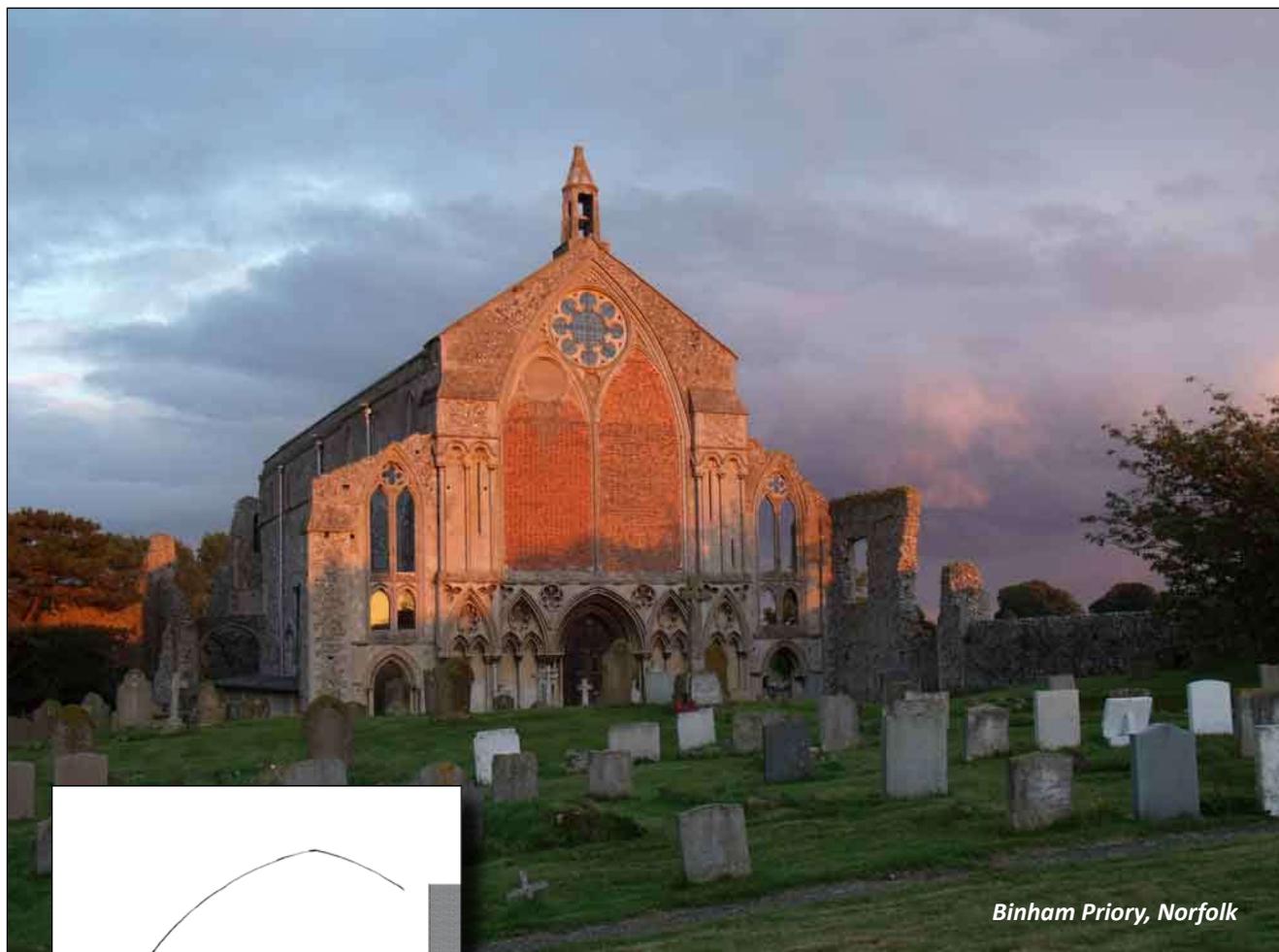
At Althamstone in Essex a neat inscription in the church records that the chancel was repaired with new timbers by the parish

Below: Lidgate, Suffolk



priest, Nicholas le Gryce, in 1578. Over three centuries earlier the Master Mason working on the revolutionary design of the west front at Binham Priory in Norfolk actually left his plans etched into the walls. His simple schematic gives us details of the design process that we could previously only speculate about.

The graffiti can also tell us about events that took place many centuries ago. Some, such as the account of the arrival of the Black Death in Ashwell church in Hertfordshire, are already well documented - although the graffiti gives it a very personal perspective. Other events were previously unknown to historians, such as the account of a military muster held in the parish of Lidgate, Suffolk, in the years leading up to the Spanish Armada. Taken as a whole the graffiti provides us with valuable evidence of past people, places and events in a new and unique way.



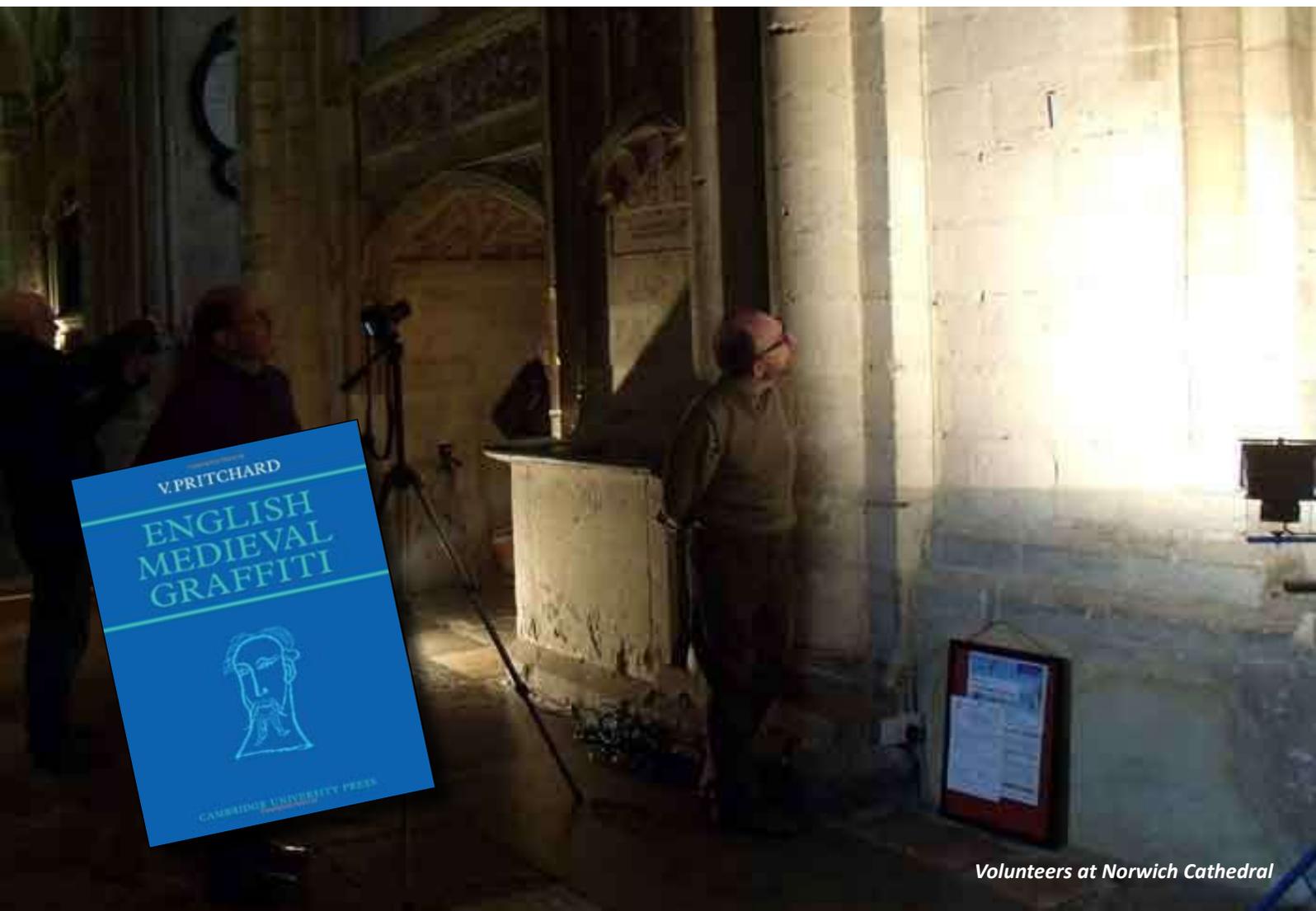
## Graffiti Recording: past and present

Recording early graffiti really isn't anything new. In the UK archaeologists and historians have been surveying and cataloguing early church graffiti since at least as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it wasn't until the 1960s that any large scale surveys were undertaken. These resulted in the publication of the only book to be written on the subject until recent years - *English Medieval Graffiti* by Violet Pritchard - which was published in 1967. At the time it was expected that Pritchard's book would spark a whole new series of large scale studies, but it was sadly not to be.

At the time that Pritchard published her work the methods used to record medieval graffiti were quite limited. The most common method was to take a rubbing of the inscription, much like brass rubbings. However, rubbings aren't very practical at sites with lots of inscriptions, can damage the graffiti itself (which is why it isn't recommended today), and tend to miss any of the lightly inscribed markings on the stonework. The only other alternatives were to hand draw each inscription, which was very time consuming, or take photographs. Photography was by far the best method, but before the introduction of digital cameras, it was also very expensive. A site with many hundreds of inscriptions would cost a great deal of money to record, and the results could often be disappointing.

The availability of cheap and mass produced digital cameras in the early twenty-first century really changed everything. It suddenly became possible to quickly and accurately record many hundreds of graffiti inscriptions - at little or no cost.

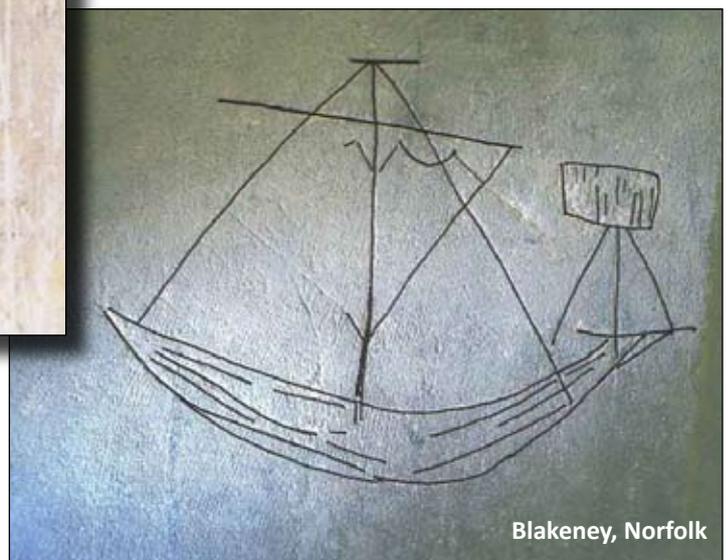
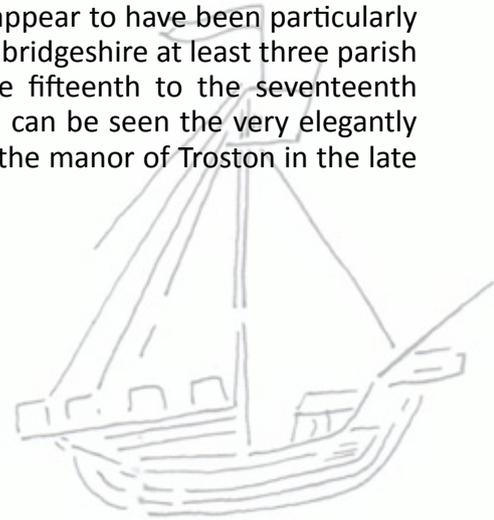
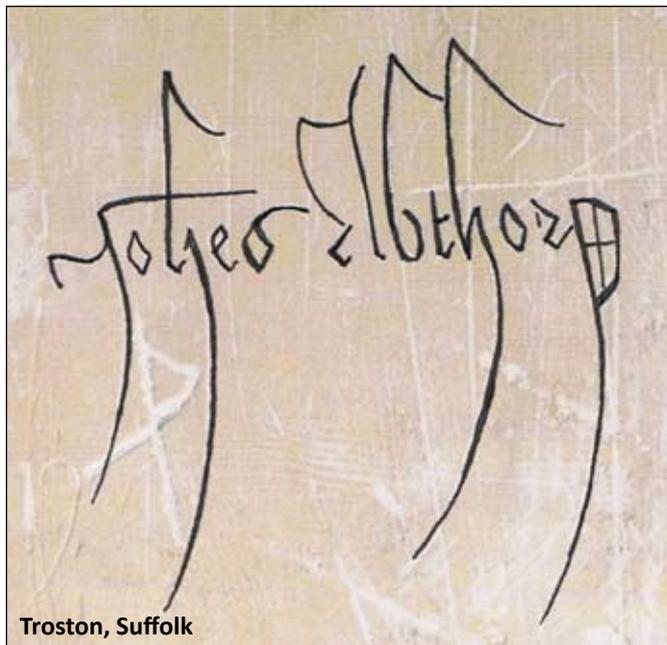
Today almost all the graffiti surveys are undertaken photographically, which means that there is no chance of any damage being caused to the inscriptions themselves. Modern surveyors use a variety of techniques, including laser scanning (lidar) and Reflectance Transformation Imagery (RTI), but one of the simplest and most effective is that known as a 'raking light' survey. To carry out a raking light survey powerful spotlights are shone obliquely across the surface of the survey area. The light shows up any imperfections, scratches and inscriptions in the surface, allowing them to be recorded photographically. Once the light goes off they disappear again - helping them remain preserved for the future.



## Who made it?

If you come across any early church guidebook that even mentions graffiti, the chances are that the blame will be placed upon 'naughty' choirboys or schoolboys. In some cases the choirboys get the blame for creating graffiti several centuries before there were even child choirs! The truth is that early graffiti inscriptions were made by just about everybody, from all levels of society.

Although early text inscriptions only make up a small percentage of medieval graffiti, they are usually easier to identify exactly who made them than some of the pictorial graffiti. In the less literate Middle Ages a Latin text inscribed into a wall was undoubtedly created by someone from the upper levels of society - a clerk, priest, or member of the gentry. Parish priests also appear to have been particularly likely to leave their names on the walls, and at Duxford church in Cambridgeshire at least three parish priests have been identified amongst the graffiti, ranging from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. On the tower arch of St Mary's church at Troston (Suffolk) can be seen the very elegantly inscribed name 'Johed (John) Abthorpe', known to have been lord of the manor of Troston in the late fifteenth century.



It is, of course, less easy to identify exactly who made many of the pictorial inscriptions that cover the walls of our medieval churches, as they could have potentially been made by anyone. However, there are a few clues that might at least indicate a particular group that may have been responsible. Blakeney church on the north Norfolk coast is well known for its fantastic collection of medieval ship graffiti - created as 'votive' images associated with St Nicholas. Although ship graffiti is commonplace throughout Europe the examples from Blakeney are unique. A large number of them show the ships with an unusual addition - a small extra sail on the stern - that appears to represent a particularly local type of fishing vessel. The fact that so many of the ship images share this element suggests that they were made by people with a good understanding of these local vessels - the fishermen themselves. When you take into account the fact that St Nicholas was the patron saint of 'those in peril upon the sea' the link appears stronger still.

However, although we do know that the graffiti was created by all levels of medieval society it is sometimes impossible to determine exactly who made individual inscriptions. In some cases it was undoubtedly the choirboys...

## What you can find

The variety of early inscriptions that are being recorded across the country is vast. Although when discussing graffiti many people tend to think of text inscriptions - the writing on the walls - these are actually relatively rare, making up only about 5% of all the recorded inscriptions. Instead the majority of the graffiti tends to be pictorial in nature. The images on the wall are truly diverse, with everything from medieval ships and windmills, to evil looking demons and knights battling dragons. Hands, faces and full length figures crowd the walls, and images of heraldry, ancient weapons and medieval merchant's marks are commonplace.

It is also clear that a large percentage of the medieval inscriptions are in fact devotional in nature - taking the form of votive images and prayers. A small number of these are written prayers, most usually in the Latin of the medieval church, but the majority are images. These can be everything from images of the crucifixion and saints, to religious symbols and ritual protection marks. This last category, more commonly referred to as 'witch marks', actually makes up about a third of all the inscriptions recorded across the UK. Despite the name the markings actually have nothing directly to do with witchcraft. Rather, they were motifs and symbols with a deep religious association that were designed to 'ward off' evil spirits. The symbols were used in all sorts of buildings, and on all sorts of objects, and continued to be used until the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. These ritual protection marks were not intended to replace the prayers of the medieval church, but rather acted as a physical manifestation of those prayers - a pictorial reinforcement.



And the markings on most church buildings obviously don't just end at the reformation in the sixteenth century. People continue to leave their marks throughout the post-medieval period. However, there are noted changes in the type and style of graffiti being made. After the reformation the inscriptions become far more like those seen today. The prayers and votive inscriptions disappear, and many of them are essentially collections of names, initials and dates - commemorating events and visits to a site. However, that doesn't mean that things like ritual protection marks simply cease to be made, it is just that they aren't made in churches as often. Instead they are to be found in private houses, barns and outbuildings, where traditional belief linger on as 'local customs' for many centuries.

## Dating graffiti?

One of the most difficult aspects of studying graffiti can be precisely dating it. A text inscription that includes a nice clear date is obviously the very best dating evidence. However, dated medieval inscriptions are incredibly rare. Dates don't tend to begin to appear until after the reformation in the middle of the sixteenth century, and don't become commonplace until the early decades of the seventeenth century. There are several possible reasons for this.

Many of the medieval church inscriptions are clearly devotional in nature, created as votive images within a religious setting. They were designed and believed to act as prayers made solid in stone, and prayers do not normally require a date. Another possible reason is that the precise date was less important to those who made the graffiti inscriptions than it is today. In a world governed by the seasons and religious festivals the need for a precise calendar date was less important than how many weeks it was to Easter, or Advent, or Lady Day.

Many of the early inscriptions cannot therefore be precisely dated, and the methods used to place them within a particular context may be considered vague by modern standards. In the case of images of people they can sometimes be dated by comparing their dress with those shown in things such as medieval manuscripts of a known period. In the case of things like ships they can be dated from their style and construction. Medieval text inscriptions can also be ascribed to a relatively precise period from the types and styles of letter-forms used. However, in a few cases the only clear dating evidence we have is the fabric of the building into which they are inscribed.

In the case of the graffiti discovered at All Saints church in Litcham, Norfolk, we can offer some level of secure dating from the building itself. The pillars of the arcades in the nave were built in the second decade of the fifteenth century, being consecrated on St Botolph's day in 1412. From the documentary evidence we also know that the pillars received their first coat of reformation lime-wash in 1547. Therefore, the graffiti inscriptions on the pillars that are gradually emerging from beneath many layers of flaking lime-wash can only have been created between 1412 and 1547. Such dating techniques may appear a little vague, but to be able to precisely pin down the date of such inscriptions to a little over a century is an unusual achievement.



Litcham, Norfolk

ANY PERSON WRITING ON  
OR SCRATCHING THE FABRIC  
OF THIS MONUMENT WILL BE  
LIABLE TO PROSECUTION  
MINISTRY OF WORKS

## Ethical questions

Any discussion about graffiti will inevitably raise ethical questions. With modern graffiti still considered by many to be largely unacceptable and destructive, questions must also be asked about historic graffiti. At what point does it become acceptable? How old does graffiti have to be before it becomes a valuable resource, and part of the historic record? The answers are not straightforward.

Most people would agree that a medieval inscription in a church, castle or cathedral is a valuable record that should be preserved and studied - even if the content is relatively mundane. A record of a prisoner held during the English Civil War would often indeed be highlighted as a valuable piece of archaeological evidence. What then about more recent examples? Can the same value be placed upon graffiti dating back to WWI? Or even WWII? The Gulf War?

The recent rise in popularity of street artists such as Banksy have changed attitudes amongst many people as to the perceived value of graffiti. Contemporary street art is hardly regarded as destructive, and even local councils have put in place measures to protect and record some of the better known and finer examples. However, the ethical questions remain. Whilst a Banksy might be welcomed on the walls of a derelict building in an inner city, would it be quite so acceptable applied to the walls of Westminster Abbey? The most probable answer is no. Which suggests that much of the value of, and attitudes towards, graffiti relate to the context in which it is created.

The perceived value of the graffiti is in what it can tell us, and the context it was created in. For example, a piece of graffiti created in 1969 that read simply "Bob kissed Sally" would be viewed very differently from a mundane inscription left by Buzz Aldren on the side of the Apollo 11 capsule. And yet they were both created at the same time, using the same materials, and with the same purpose in mind - the commemoration of an event. However, the Buzz Aldren graffiti takes on enhanced value from the context in which it was created, and our own perceptions and knowledge of that context. All graffiti is an expression of human emotion - both negative and positive - but does this mean that all graffiti is valuable, or that all graffiti should be preserved? Attitudes towards graffiti have changed over time, and they continue to evolve to this day.

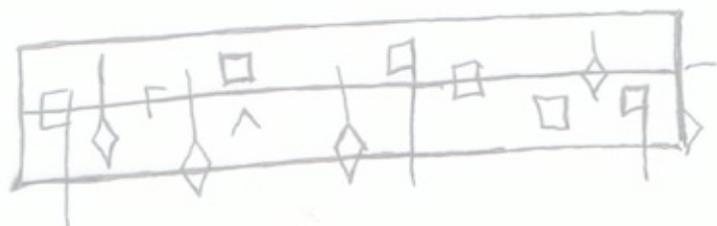
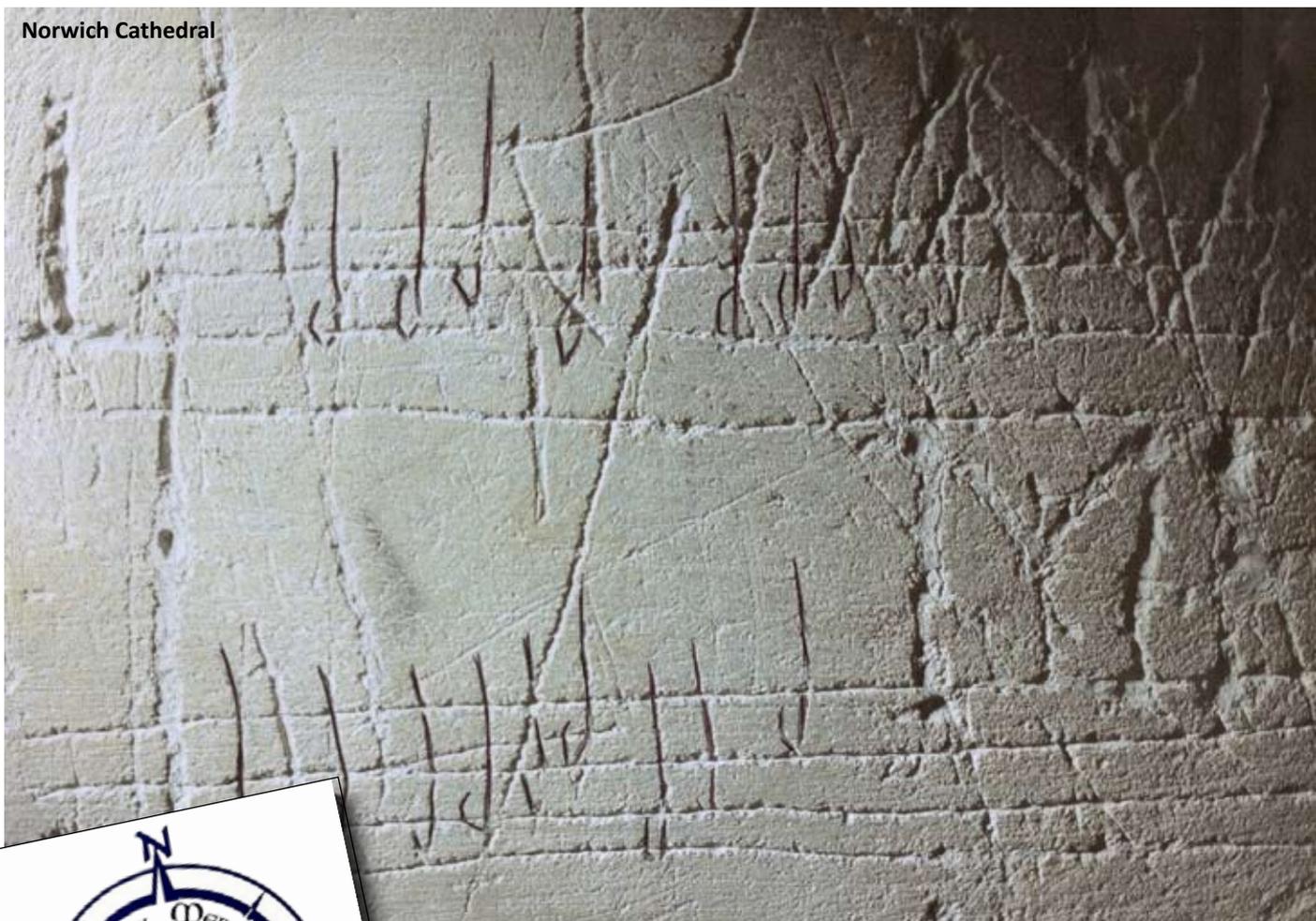


## Crossing boundaries...

Although this project focused upon Norfolk medieval graffiti such inscriptions are not confined to one part of the country, or even a single country. The types of inscriptions found in Norfolk churches are currently being recorded all over the UK. What is perhaps most intriguing is that identical inscriptions are being found in churches in the west of England as are being found in East Anglia. The ritual and devotional markings, which make up approximately a third of all graffiti inscriptions, can also be found in churches and religious buildings all across western Europe - essentially everywhere that the medieval church flourished. They form a pan-European language of devotion and belief that was obviously recognised and understood across a wide geographical area. What is perhaps most intriguing of all is that, despite being present across the majority of Europe, and numbering into the hundreds of thousands, these markings have almost entirely failed to appear in the written record.

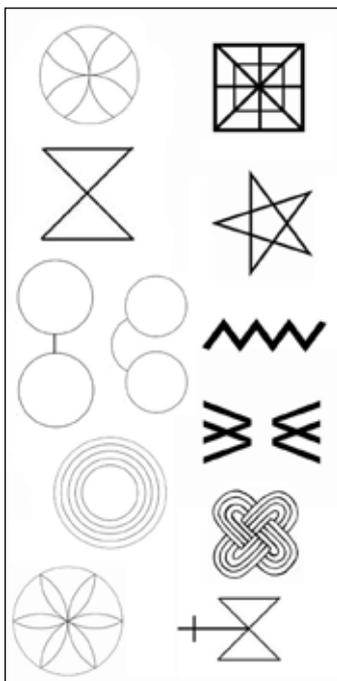
However, there are a number of other widespread 'folk practices' that have been continued for many centuries, but have also escaped the written record. One of the most obvious of these is the act of throwing coins into a fountain or wishing well. The practice has been carried out since at least the seventeenth century, and probably pre-dates this by several centuries, but also almost entirely escapes the notice of the written records. It is something most of us have done at some point in our lives, but few of us will have written about it afterwards. This all rather suggests that there are certain activities that are so widespread and mundane that few people consider them worth recording.

Norwich Cathedral



# Section 2: Interpretation

## Ritual Protection Marks

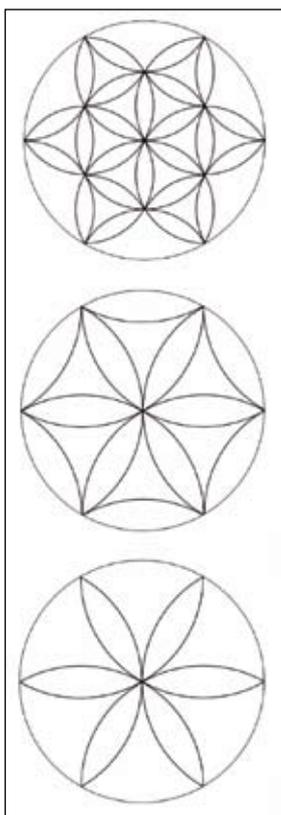


Ritual Protection Marks are defined as symbols that have a overt 'apotropaic' function. Although many objects and artefacts may be considered to be apotropaic, or contain apotropaic elements, (derived from the Greek, meaning 'to turn away') this article largely concentrates upon those inscribed markings found in English medieval churches and, to differentiate them from the wider area of study, are referred to as 'ritual protection marks' throughout. A strict definition of what does, or does not, constitute a ritual protection mark is fraught with difficulties, and can depend upon a number of not entirely related factors. The same marking used in different circumstances and contexts may have widely differing meanings, not all of which can be considered apotropaic. As Philip Zeigler has observed, 'in medieval history, it sometimes seems that the more precisely a question is defined, the more certain it is that no answer will be forthcoming'.

In the very simplest of general terms these markings are believed to turn away, or ward off, evil. Apotropaic markings in general are often thought of as acting as a form of sympathetic magic, where, for example, the ritual scorching of newly built timbers would subsequently protect the building from fire and lightning strikes; quite literally 'fighting fire with fire'. However, whilst some ritual protection markings found in medieval churches may follow this form, the vast majority appear to be derived from a more complex system of beliefs. They can be considered to be the physical manifestations of a system of belief that thought in multiple layers of spiritual defence; essentially each symbol can be considered a protective marking that operated in addition to, but not separate from, the prayers of the medieval church.

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## Compass Drawn Designs



These compass drawn designs, sometimes referred to as hexfoils, are by far the most common single motif that we come across, with several thousand recorded to date. They can range from simple circles, through six petalled flower designs (known as Daisy Wheels or Hexfoils), to highly complex geometric constructions. Whilst the majority of them are small in size, being less than 100mm across, larger examples have been recorded that are nearly a metre across. It was originally believed that these designs were created by the actual masons who built the churches. They were thought to be either the mason's teaching their apprentices the basics of geometry or creating a guide for themselves to ensure that their own dividers were correctly adjusted.

Whilst some of the compass drawn designs were undoubtedly created by the medieval masons it now appears unlikely that they were responsible for anything other than a very small percentage. The sheer number of examples, inscribed into stonework, woodwork and even the lead linings of fonts, suggest that these designs were created by far more than a single trade group and that they had a clear and distinct meaning and function. At the present time we believe that the vast majority of these designs acted as 'ritual protection' (apotropaic) markings. There is no simple explanation of the form and function of apotropaic markings. At their most basic level they could be seen as bringing luck and protecting individuals from evil or malign influence. At a more complex quasi-theological level they were designed to trap the demons that roamed the world within their complex structure, quite literally pinning them to the walls.

## Ship Graffiti

Although at first glance the presence of ship graffiti on the walls of a coastal church may appear straightforward. Local sailors and their families simply sketching what they saw every day. However, the work of the survey nationwide has raised a number of interesting questions that cast some doubt on the simplistic approach. Although many of these ship images are located in coastal churches, with particular concentrations around medieval ports, just as many are to be found inland. Indeed, examples have been recorded as far inland as Leicestershire, where it would be difficult to get any farther from the coast. Despite this all the examples recorded to date all show seagoing vessels rather than river craft.



In addition, surveys in churches such as St Nicholas, Blakeney, and St Thomas', Winchelsea, all appear to show a very distinct distribution pattern to the graffiti. Rather than being randomly scratched into the walls they appear to concentrate in particular areas of the church. At Blakeney, despite the whole church being covered by early inscriptions, all the ship graffiti appears on the south arcade, clustered around a side altar and an empty image niche. Each respects the other images around it, not covering them over, and archaeologists suggest that they were created over a period of at least two centuries. The suggestion, therefore, is that many of these ship images were in fact devotional in nature. Literally prayers made solid in stone. Exactly what these prayers were for remains something of a mystery. Where they thanks for a voyage safely undertaken, a prayer for a safe voyage yet to come, or perhaps a plea for a ship long overdue? We will probably never know, however it is possible they may be informal versions of votive ships, models which were displayed within churches at the time.

## VV Symbol

Although probably one of the more common inscriptions to come across, on timber, stone, tombs and lead-work, it is also probably one of the most enigmatic. Often shown inverted to resemble a capital 'M', or even upon its side, some churches can be found to contain several dozen examples. The symbol has been interpreted as being associated with the cult of the Virgin Mary, and it has been suggested that the 'V V' have represented the initial letters of the term 'Virgo Virginum' (Virgin of Virgins). However, more recent research suggests this interpretation unlikely.



The possible connection between the 'VV' symbol and the Latin prayer or phrase 'Virgo Virginum' was first mooted by Brian Spencer in 1990, with particular reference to the examples of the motif he was coming across in relation to pilgrim souvenirs. The term 'Virgo Virginum' is the first line of the sung prayer 'O Virgo Virginum', one of the 'O Antiphons' which were chanted at vespers in the days leading up to the feast of the Nativity. In the traditional European catholic church there were seven of these Antiphons, each representing a name and virtue of Christ, with the English church adding the 8th, that of 'O Virgo Virginum', in the later Middle Ages.

Even then the phrase wasn't well known in England, being limited to only the larger religious institutions. The fact that the phrase was largely confined to England also makes the popularity of the symbol in mainland Europe difficult to explain. It is also one of the few ritual protection marks that made the occasional cross-over into more traditional church art form, appearing above the west door of Fakenham church, in North Norfolk, where it is associate with the Virgin Mary, and on the 15th century font at Aylsham church, where it is associated with the scourging of Christ. However, the origins of the symbol may be far earlier. The earliest examples of this symbol being used for ritual purposes are to be found in the runic writing systems of Scandinavia, and even today it is still regarded as a Holy sign associated with life, death and fertility in many areas of the eastern Baltic.

## Crosses



Whilst it is hardly surprising to find crosses inscribed into churches what is remarkable is where they are found. Almost 80% of all the cross inscriptions are not actually located within the main body of the church, but around the entrance doorway and most usually, if there is one, in the porch. These can vary from elaborate and deeply incised crosses to mere scratches on the surface. Often they appear in clusters, or in small groups and doorways such as that at Ludham or Colkirk can have as many as a dozen of these inscriptions.

Although traditionally thought to have been created by people as they went off on pilgrimage, or as thanksgiving for a safe return, there appears to be no evidence for such an interpretation, it only arising in recent centuries. It appears far more likely that these inscriptions are related to the former use that the church porch was put to in the middle ages. Although today the porch is usually little more than a place to hang the church notice board this wasn't the case in the past. The porch had an important function, with a number of ceremonies, such as marriage and the 'churching of women', partly taking place there. The porch also functioned as a parish office, with agreements and contracts being drawn up and witnessed there. It is possible that these crosses are related to transactions or agreements that were carried out in the porch, and were made as a result.

## Solomon's Knot



This design has been discovered in numerous churches all over Europe. Although it is an ancient symbol, appearing upon Roman mosaics from as early as the 4th century, it appears to have been adopted as a Christian symbol, appearing on a number of early fonts and stonework – such as the superb example located at Sculthorpe church. Although not as common a discovery as many of the other ritual protections marks it does appear in a number of widely spread churches, suggesting that its meaning and symbolism was widely understood.

It has been suggested that it relates back to the story of Solomon's Knot in the Old Testament, in which King Solomon was given a ring by an archangel, inscribed with a powerful symbol that gave him power over demons. The folk belief associated this symbol, shown sometimes as a Star of David, Pentangle or 'endless knot', was that demons were curious – and rather stupid. If they saw a line then they had to follow it. In the case of the Solomon's knot the line was effectively endless – trapping the demon within the symbol itself.

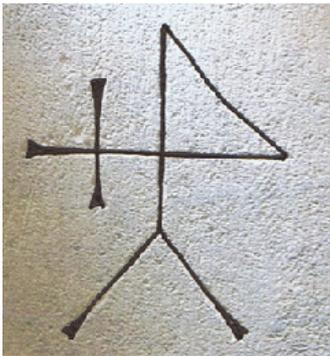
## Mason's Marks



Masons marks were inscribed on the stones of the church during construction by the stone-masons themselves. It is believed that they were used to indicate which mason had actually carried out which piece of work - and allowed them to be paid accordingly. One church may contain many different marks, such as Wighton, or many copies of the same symbol, such as Norwich Cathedral. Mason's marks tend to be quite simple markings, usually neatly executed and involving a series of straight lines. This gave them the advantage of being produced with the minimum of effort whilst still being distinctive.

Mason's marks can be located just about anywhere in a church. However, unlike the more general graffiti markings, they also tend to appear higher up on the stonework, in areas that could only be reached with the aid of scaffolding or a ladder. What isn't currently clear is whether mason's continued with the same markings throughout their careers? Did their apprentices develop a variation on the theme of their master's mark, or did they develop an entirely new symbol. Were mason's marks passed from generation to generation? The fundamental problem with interpretation of mason's marks is whether the same symbol appearing in two different churches was actually created by the same individual mason? Although not technically graffiti we also record all the examples that we come across.

## Merchant's Marks



A Merchant's Mark was a distinctive symbol used by a merchant for a variety of purposes. It could be used to mark his goods and property, in signing documents and even on his personal seal. It was a symbol that would have been instantly recognisable, to both literate and illiterate, as belonging to a particular individual. It was, in effect, the 'logo' of the Middle Ages. However, it may well be that some of the merchant's marks that we come across do not actually relate to a particular individual but to a religious or trade guild instead. Much as the larger Livery Companies in cities such as London had their own specialist mark, it would appear that the practice was copied by the more modest local guilds, and at least a proportion of the markings we come across may relate to these organisations, particularly when associated with a side altar or guild chapel.

Merchant's marks can often be mistaken for mason's marks, and are often very similar in style and composition. However, they do show a number of distinct differences. Merchant's marks tend to be far larger than the average mason's mark, often appear less professionally executed and are far more likely to contain curved elements.

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## Heraldry



Coats of arms, heraldic elements and shields in general are relatively common finds amongst medieval graffiti. They can vary enormously in quality, from neatly executed full coats of arms, such as that on the east face of the chancel arch at Troston St Mary, to mere scratched outline shapes, such as those found at Swannington. Although we tend to expect well inscribed heraldic graffiti to be identifiable that simply hasn't been the case – with few inscriptions being able to be positively identified with any particular family. The reason for this is fairly straightforward. Heraldry relies upon colour for its full meaning to be apparent and the graffiti inscriptions contain no elements of colour. Therefore, even a neatly executed shield, with identifiable elements, but not colour, could potentially have belonged to as many as twenty or more families.

The most notable feature concerning heraldic graffiti is the fact that, of all the graffiti inscriptions found in churches, it appears to be the most likely to be subsequently defaced. In certain churches, such as Bale in North Norfolk, areas that contain several graffiti inscriptions are still clearly visible. However, amongst the many inscriptions it is clearly only those of a heraldic nature that have been defaced. It is thought that this may be because the heraldic graffiti was associated with particular individuals, whilst many of the other inscriptions were devotional in nature. It was therefore easy to strike at an individual or family by destroying their coat of arms, whilst less likely that devotional imagery would be attacked, thereby bringing down the wrath of God.

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## Pentangles



The pentangle is an extremely ancient symbol whose use has been recorded as far back 3000BC. Since the reformation the symbol has become associated with the magical arts and, in more recent centuries, it has become particularly associated with Wiccan practises and Victorian concepts of 'black' magic. However, during the middle ages it is clear that this symbol was regarded as a specifically Christian symbol with no 'evil' connotations and, more specifically, was seen as a symbol of protection. According to the 14th century poem, Gawain and the Green Knight, the symbol represented the five wounds of Christ, the five virtues of a Knight and was taken as a symbol of fidelity.

The pentangle is most certainly one of the less prolific ritual protection marks found in medieval churches. Compared to the compass drawn motifs it is relatively rare, appearing in only a dozen or so Norfolk churches surveyed to date. However, it appears in sufficient quantities in diverse locations for it to be regarded as an apotropaic marking.

## Text Inscriptions

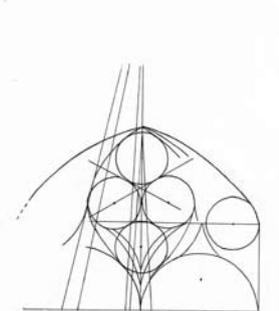


Although finding medieval text inscriptions in a church is most certainly one of the most exciting discoveries it is also one of the most frustrating. The temptation when finding text inscriptions is to try and read them. However, almost half the text inscriptions recorded to date have remained undecipherable. In many cases this is simply because the inscription itself is too worn to do anything other than recognise it as text and identify the odd letter.

In other cases the problems lie with the person who created the inscription in the first place. Medieval Latin inscriptions, most probably created by a cleric, are often truncated, abbreviated and incomplete, as was common practice at the time. However, unless all the letters are extremely clear it is often not possible to establish exactly what the abbreviated word was originally intended to be. In addition, certain text inscriptions, such as the 'cryptogram' located at All Saints, Litcham, tend to merge the letters into each other, making the final down stroke of one letter also be the first down stroke of the next letter. Combined together these factors do make text inscriptions difficult to decipher for even the most experienced historian.

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## Architectural Inscriptions



Alongside the more informal graffiti inscriptions the volunteers have also occasionally come across sketches, designs and working drawings actually created by the medieval craftsmen who worked on the church. Until the beginning of the survey such architectural designs were thought to be incredibly rare, with only a couple of dozen having been discovered in the whole of the UK. Since the survey began we have managed to double the number of known examples. They can vary tremendously in scale, location and detail, but all share the common theme – that they have been created using precision tools. The largest of the examples located at Binham Priory was nearly two metres tall, whilst the sketch for a window design at Weston Longville was only 140mm across.

In terms of location, the designs can be found just about anywhere where a flat surface was available, although the rear of rood screens was particularly popular. Such flat surfaces would have made a perfect drawing board for the craftsmen and, as the lines are now exceedingly difficult to make out, many of the examples have remained unnoticed for centuries.

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## Human Figures



A common feature of early graffiti inscriptions is the number of full length figure and faces that are recorded. Many of the figures, such as those from Troston, show clear medieval figures with hands raised in attitudes of prayer, and are clearly devotional in nature. Others, such as the full length medieval female figure on the chancel arch at Swannington, are more ambiguous in nature. Many of the faces also appear stylised to the point of caricature, and it is difficult to suggest that they have any devotional aspects. A few examples might certainly show more secular activities.

At Marsham there is a small and crudely executed scene at the base of one of the piers that shows two figures. The first, shown with sword and shield, is clearly meant to be a knight or soldier of some sort. The opposite figure appears to be a beast or dragon of some sort. However, close inspection reveals that the dragon figure appears, instead of feet, to show a fringe of some sort. Such fringes were commonly seen on medieval players costumes, such as the Norwich 'Snapdragons', and were designed to hide the feet of the individual inside the costume. It may well be then that the Marsham scene, rather than depicting a battle between a knight and dragon, actually shows a scene from a medieval mummers play. Perhaps a play enacted in the very same church

## Merels

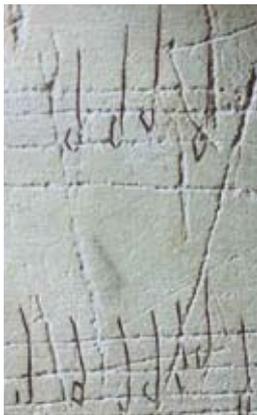
These often small inscriptions have been the subject of antiquarian interest for many years, although with little agreement as to their meaning and function. Their similarity to a number of medieval board games, most notably Merels and Nine-Mans-Morris, have led to them often being thought of as smaller versions of the same games. Indeed, a number of early writers on the subject described the simplest rectangles with crossed lines as 'three-mans-morris', or even the unlikely 'one-mans-morris'.



The problem with such an interpretation is fairly straightforward, in that gaming boards, such as that shown at bottom right, ARE found in our churches and cathedrals. However, these are invariably located on horizontal surfaces such as benches and window reveals, whilst most of the other motifs are being recorded on vertical surfaces. The motif also turns up in a number of manuscript illustrations, where it is associated with astrology and the making of horoscopes, and it shares many features with other recognised symbols of protection. It is also notable that at sites such as Swannington, Lidgate and Ashwell, the same symbol is to be found in concentrations of other ritual protection marks, clearly suggesting that it was regarded as performing a similar function. However, as with many symbols found amongst the graffiti, the meaning and function of any motif may change and be entirely dependent upon the circumstances in which it was created

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## Musical Graffiti

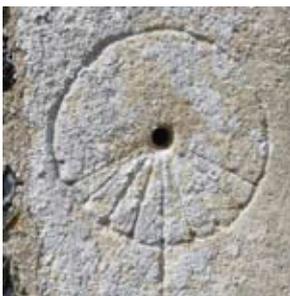


Musical notation is amongst the very rarest of all types of early church graffiti, with only a few dozen high quality examples being recorded across the entire country. In most cases the inscriptions are to be found in our larger religious buildings, such as Norwich cathedral and York Minster, and most examples identified to date appear to be examples of chant or plainsong. They are also often shown on a four line stave, with the modern five line stave not entering general usage until the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries.

The reason for this bias towards the abbeys, priories and cathedrals may be a relatively simple one. During the Middle Ages it was only at these larger monastic sites that musical notation was regularly used and taught - and it is no coincidence that many of our finest choir schools are still attached to sites such as Westminster Abbey and Winchester Cathedral.

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## Mass Dials



Mass dials, also known as scratch dials, have long been the subject of academic and antiquarian study, being amongst the very first informal church inscriptions to be systematically record. Indeed, it is a rarity to open a county archaeological journal from the 1920s or 1930s that does not contain some reference to them, and over 6000 have so far been documented. The traditional interpretation is that these simple sundials were used by either the parish priest, congregation or bell ringers to calculate the correct time for services. Most usually located on the south side of the church they take many forms and come in all shapes and sizes. If found elsewhere on the church then the traditional interpretation is that the stone into which they were carved has been moved or recycled.

However, these traditional interpretations are now seen as being open to question. The number of these dials being found on the north side of churches, where they simply wouldn't work, is notable - and the likelihood of them all being on recycled stone is slim. Many churches also have multiple and identical mass dials, all of which rather suggests that there is much more to these simple inscriptions than first meets the eye...

## A nimals etc...



Animals, birds and fish are common motifs amongst the early graffiti inscriptions, and are to be found all over the country. Many of the bird inscriptions are to be found associated with other known religious motifs, particularly crosses, suggesting that they may be linked to several Christian stories. In medieval art the Holy Ghost is often depicted as a bird, and such inscriptions might well be supplications aimed directly at an element of the Trinity.

However, the interpretation for many of these inscriptions may be far more mundane. What is clear is that there are many types of animals that we might expect to find amongst the graffiti, but are simply not to be found. The farm animals that play such a major role in the medieval economy, that provided the money to actually build the great medieval churches - the sheep, pigs and cattle - are only rarely shown. Instead it is the animals of the woods, forests and the hunt that we are coming across - the deer, hunting dogs and hares.

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## S ho es/hands



One of the universal motifs that occur all over the country, and throughout history, appear to be the creation of hand and shoe inscriptions. Echoing the very earliest of cave art, these inscriptions perhaps give more of a feeling of real people having been present than any others.

Many of the inscriptions are clearly drawn around actual hands and shoes, making them particularly individual and personal, and it has been suggested that some of the medieval examples show possible links with site of pilgrimage. However, shoes in particular are also linked to many other early beliefs, sometimes being concealed within buildings to ward off evil, and have known links with church ceremonies such as weddings.

In the post medieval period some of these inscriptions are undoubtedly memorial in nature, appearing with names, initials and dates inscribed within them. Some may be commemorating a visit to a site, whilst others, particularly those found on the lead of the church roof, appear to commemorate works undertaken on the building.

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## D ot Patterns



A common find in many churches, both those with and without graffiti inscriptions, are multiple dot patterns. In some cases the dots are clearly just being used as the terminus points for other inscriptions, such as crosses or stars, but in others their function is less obvious. A lot of these dot patterns have been deeply inscribed into the surface of the stone or plaster, and they do tend to be found in groups.

In a number of cases, and at a number of sites, the dots appear to follow numerical values, being found in generally uneven numbers, and commonly in groups of three, five, seven and nine. Certain uneven numbers had considerable significance in the medieval church, such as the Trinity and the seven sacraments, and numbers were also regarded as powerful within aspects of medieval magic.

It has been suggested that the holes or dots are the result of local and regional practice of folk medicine. In some areas, particularly in France and Spain, it was until recently believed that the stone or plaster of the church, ground to a fine powder and mixed with wine, was an effective cure for many illnesses and diseases. This may well have been the case in England also, although there is no direct evidence to support the idea. Indeed, the significance of these dot patterns may contain elements of any or all of the above, but it is certainly still a matter of some debate.

## Ragged Staff



The Ragged Staff motif is one that is well known to anybody with an interest in medieval heraldry. The 'Bear and Ragged Staff' was used as a 'livery' symbol by the Earl's of Warwick throughout much of the later Middle Ages, and the Earl's servants and retainers are commonly depicted as just wearing the symbol of the Ragged Staff as a badge. As a symbol it also turns up fairly regularly amongst church graffiti. As long ago as 1967 Violet Pritchard suggested that the presence of the Ragged Staff amongst church graffiti was more than simply associated with heraldry. The number of times it was recorded, often in association with religious imagery, and the fact that it was the only 'livery' symbol to appear amongst the graffiti, led to the suggestion that it might indeed be a religious symbol. This idea was supported by the discovery of a number of medieval lead 'pilgrim' badges depicting the Ragged Staff, but also displaying religious mottoes.

The general consensus today is that the symbol most certainly has a religious function - but that we aren't entirely certain just what that function might be. There were certainly a number of saints with whom a staff was associated, with St Christopher perhaps being the most likely candidate.

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## Taper Burn Marks



If you have ever been inside an ancient medieval or Tudor house the chances are that you may have noticed deep scorch or burn marks on parts of the building, most obviously on the beam above a fireplace. Known today as 'taper burn marks', these scorches were for a long time believed to be the result of accidents with unguarded candles, or simply the work of children playing with fire. However, in recent decades it has been suggested that such marks were very deliberately made, and actually had a ritual function.

Recent studies have shown that these markings turn up all over the timbers of many early houses, and often in places where there is little chance of a candle having been left alone - or even able to get to. These include roof timbers, wall plates and hidden beneath the floor. Experiments have also shown that, to create the very distinctive tear-drop shaped mark, a taper or candle has to be applied to the timbers at a very specific angle. The markings are also to be found in churches as well, most often on the inside of the main door. The current thinking is that many, if not all, of these marks were applied to the timbers during the period of construction, and some before the timbers were even put in place. The idea behind their creation, it is believed, was to guard the building against lightning - and more specifically fire. It can, in some respects, be thought of as inoculating the building - literally 'fighting fire with fire'.

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## Consecration Crosses



A once common site in churches everywhere, these crosses are often today found as only outlines in the stonework, and as such are sometimes mistaken for graffiti. When a church was first constructed, or significantly altered, it had to be consecrated by the local Bishop prior to worship taking place in the building. In essence, the structure had to be made into a sacred space. To do this the Bishop would bless the building and anoint it with holy oil, twelve times outside and twelve times inside. Each of the places that were anointed with oil would then be marked with a cross - known today as a 'consecration cross'.

When originally created each of these crosses would have been painted, most usually in a red pigment, and surviving examples can be found in many churches across England. However, in most churches the pigment has now been lost, leaving only the setting-out lines of the crosses around the walls.

# Section 3: Suggested Activities

We have put together a few ideas for group activities and discussions that you might find useful. All of the resources to support these are available via the project website, and further reading material can be found in the bibliography.

## Research/Discussion Topics

1. What are the main differences between modern and ancient graffiti? Themes to explore can include the differences in subject matter, the locations, methods of creation. The key focus of the discussion can aim to address the changing attitudes towards ancient and modern graffiti - how and when those changes take place - and what might be the cause of those changes.

Further ideas and details concerning changing attitudes towards graffiti can be found in the teachers notes and work-sheet available on the project website.

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2. The relationship between early graffiti inscriptions and matters of faith, belief and modern perceptions of 'witchcraft'. Details of the different graffiti types can be found in the 'interpretation' section above, with further information available on the project website. Key themes to explore involve the role and perceived function of 'ritual protection marks' (witch marks). What were these symbols? Where did they originate from? Why they might have been considered to have possessed 'power'? Are there any modern examples where symbols and motifs might be considered to have an intrinsic power?

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3. The graffiti scenario. A wide ranging question designed to encourage debate amongst students by challenging their own perceptions of legitimacy and acceptability, and discuss ideas of graffiti within a wider context. Begin by reading the group the following statement -

"A famous street artist (such as Banksy) creates a graffiti mural on the side of a building expressly against the wishes of the owner. The owner wishes to destroy the mural, whilst the local council wish to protect it as a tourist attraction. What should happen to the mural?"

Encourage the group/class to discuss what value the graffiti might have? The pros and cons of destroying it, or allowing it to remain? Then read the class the following statement, and encourage them to discuss why their own attitudes might be different in the two situations.

"A famous street artist (such as Banksy) creates a graffiti mural on the side of a historic cathedral. Both the cathedral authorities AND the local council are undecided as to the fate of the mural. What should happen to it, and why?"



## Undertake your own graffiti survey

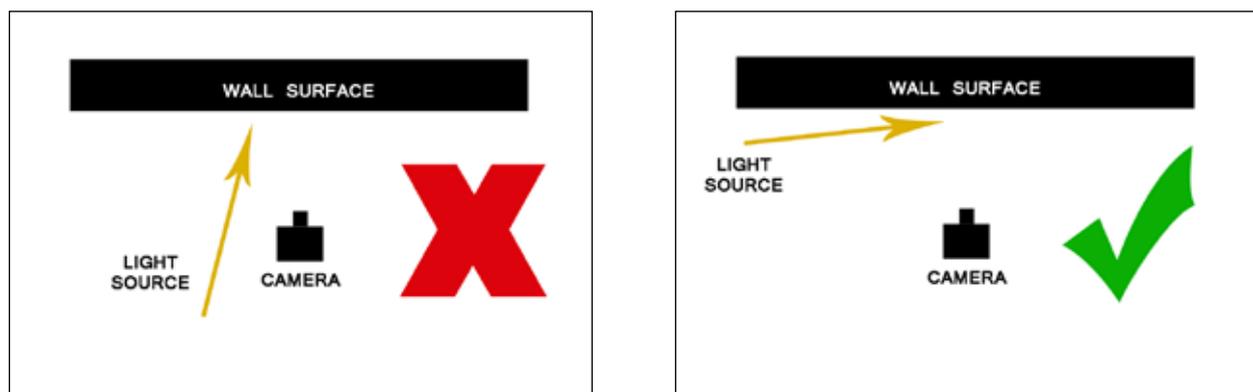
Not as difficult or complicated as it sounds, with opportunities to engage groups with practical activities that stimulate class/group debates.

What you will need: Camera, Light source (torch or similar), Scale or Ruler, Pencil/Pen, Volunteers Handbook, Survey Sheets, Photographic Sheets - all the paperwork is available, free to download, from the project website - [www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk](http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk)

Identify your site: firstly you will need to find a suitable site to survey. Not all churches contain surviving graffiti, but a short visit to a small number will undoubtedly identify a suitable candidate. It is then simply a matter of contacting the churchwardens or priest to arrange a time. Contact details for all churches are available via the 'A church near you' website (see below).

Establishing survey groups: surveys are best undertaken by individuals working in small groups. Experience has shown that a group of three works well, with one to control the light, one to take the photograph, and one to deal with the record keeping.

Undertaking a survey: the easiest way to undertake an effective survey is to use a technique known as 'raking light'. This involves shining a light obliquely across the surface of the survey object, which highlights any marking on the surface, allowing a photograph to be taken. Full details of how to undertake a survey, and use the survey sheets, are contained in the Volunteers Handbook on the website.



### Things to remember:

Take more than one photograph of each inscription, with the light source in different positions.

Check every surface - not just the stonework. Graffiti inscriptions can be found on stone, wood, lead, and even glass.

Once you have completed the survey it is time to look at the data and see what it can tell you. Although you can learn a great deal from individual inscriptions, you can also learn a lot from the collection as a whole. Things to consider include:

Distribution patterns - are you seeing concentrations of inscriptions in certain areas, or on certain materials? If so, why might this be the case?

Chronological Hotspots - are you seeing concentrations of certain dates amongst the graffiti? Can you identify these 'hot spots' and suggest any possible explanations?

How do the graffiti inscriptions relate to the internal geography of the church? Do the inscriptions perhaps relate to other activities that may have taken place in the building?

Further research: if there are names and dates present amongst the graffiti then you may have the opportunity to carry out further research identifying exactly who these people were. A good place to start would be the catalogue of the local record office (usually available on-line) of the National Archives (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>).

# Section 4: Additional Resources

## Glossary:

**Apotropaic:** a symbol, marking or object believed to have the power to ward off evil or harmful spirits.

**Chancel:** the section of the church at the east end, where the altar was located. Access to the chancel was often restricted to the parish priest and officers of the church. Legal and financial responsibility for the chancel most usually fell to the parish priest, rector, or church patrons.

**Consecration:** once a religious structure had been completed it required that it was dedicated to religious use. This was normally undertaken by a Bishop, who would anoint the building with holy oil (chrism), twelve times on the inside and twelve times on the outside. The places the Bishop had anointed were then marked with a decorative cross - known as a 'consecration cross'. Many such medieval crosses can still be seen in churches across England.

**Cryptogram:** a type of puzzle or rebus consisting of words or letters.

**Graffiti:** an informal inscription created using a variety of media including charcoal, paint, pencil and inscribing the surface. Today 'graffiti' is regarded as a plural noun, with the singular 'graffito' being regarded as archaic; used largely only by Cambridge professors of archaeology.

**Lady Day:** one of the 'quarter days' (usually the 25th March - the feast of the Annunciation) upon which rents were due to be paid, and debts settled.

**Laser scanning (lidar):** the controlled direction of a laser beam across a surface to precisely map the surface imperfections.

**Master Mason:** a supervising mason, who oversaw the work and employment of more general masons. Often undertook the equivalent role of that of a modern architect and designer.

**Merchant's Marks:** each merchant would have their own individual mark or symbol that they used to mark their goods, sign documents, etc. In essence, the 'logo' of the Middle Ages.

**Nave:** referring to the main or central part of the church where the congregation would be during services. The nave was the parish's part of the church, for which they most usually took financial responsibility.

**Reflectance Transformation Imagery (RTI):** a computer based photographic survey technique used to create a detailed 3D style image of a surface.

**Reformation:** the period in the middle of the sixteenth century that saw the break from the authority of the Church of Rome and the establishment of the Protestant church in England. Generally accepted as beginning in 1534 with the Act of Supremacy, which declared Henry VIII the Supreme Head of the Church of England.

**Ritual Protection Mark:** a corpus of marks and symbols applied to objects, surfaces and materials, that were believed to offer protection from misfortune, and ward off evil spirits.

**Wiccan:** a new pagan religious movement developed in the twentieth century, which some claim to be based upon earlier pre-Christian beliefs involving the worship of a pantheon of earth and fertility based gods.

**Witch Mark:** a common modern term most usually misapplied to ritual protection marks (see 'ritual protection mark')

# Resources

If you want to learn more about early graffiti inscriptions there are a number of ways open to you.

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## ***Bibliography:***

There are currently only two full length works available on the subject of medieval church graffiti, and both will be available via your local library.

Medieval Graffiti: the lost voices of England's churches by Matthew Champion (Ebury, 2015)

English Medieval Graffiti by Violet Pritchard (Cambridge University Press, 1967)

The project website also hosts a regularly updated 'graffiti bibliography' - covering all aspects of early inscriptions and ritual markings in the UK. A number of these resources are available freely online. You can find the bibliography here - <http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk/page9.html>

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***Facebook:*** As well as the NMGS page, there is a Facebook group dedicated to early graffiti and inscriptions. The English Medieval Graffiti group page can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1612541522308776/>

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***A Church Near You:*** website maintained by the Church of England listing details of all the current parish churches in England, including location details and contact details. <https://www.achurchnearyou.com/>



[www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk](http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk)  
[info@medieval-graffiti.co.uk](mailto:info@medieval-graffiti.co.uk)

