

Graffiti survey of Conduit House

by Karen Wardley



A graffiti survey of Conduit House was carried out on 9th June 2021 by Matt Garner and Karen Wardley, from Southampton Archaeology Society graffiti team. The Conduit House was part of Southampton's medieval water supply system, originally set up by the Friars Minor in the early 14th century. Water was piped from a spring in Hill (where the medieval stone Conduit Head still survives) to the Friary in the southeast corner of the town. The friars handed over the system to the town in 1420 and Conduit House (*pictured left*) was probably built in 1434. The Steward's Book

for that year records that over 60 tons of limestone were brought from the Isle of Wight along with labourers, stone masons, carpenters and plumbers employed to carry out the substantial works. Conduit House continued in use into the 19th century, with water from two sources to the northwest and northeast feeding into the large tank within the building and flowing out in one lead pipe to supply the town. The building is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, owned and maintained by Southampton City Council.

Graffiti summary and discussion

The surveyors were able to refer to plans and elevations showing the individual stones of the vaulted structure, made by Southampton Museums Archaeology Section Survey Team in 1986 and 1987. The location of graffiti and other markings were added to the drawing of the vault.

Exterior The outer stone surfaces are weathered so it was unlikely that much historical graffiti would be found. The only example found was an upward pointing arrow incised in the lintel over the eastern doorway.



Above: Arrow incised on lintel stone above eastern doorway.
Left: OS benchmark cut into cornerstone. Photos - K. Wardley

On the southeast corner of the building is a block of stone on which, intriguingly, there are two Ordnance Survey (OS) benchmarks. That on the south face is the more usual type of cut mark.



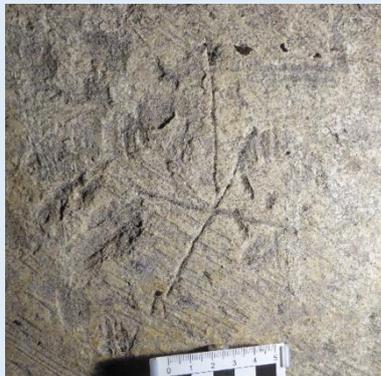
Above: Inverted cut benchmark with bolt head.
 Right: Enlarged image of bolt head (see text).
 Photos – K Wardley

On the east face is an inverted cut mark, and what appeared to be a bronze disc set into the stone with 50 incised on it. This implies that the stone was moved and inverted after the original benchmark was cut, making it an unreliable surveying reference, so a new benchmark was made to replace it on the adjacent face. The bronze disc is actually a bolt head, part of a more unusual type of “bolt” benchmark, which is recorded as such on the 1:500 OS map from 1870 as Bolt 40.2. The significance of the number 50 is unclear.



Interior

The most striking aspect of the interior of Conduit House is the large number of masons' marks visible on individual blocks. These were noted on a drawing made by Southampton Museums Archaeology Section Survey Team, drawing ref SCM 153, in 1987. However, this drawing only recorded 17 marks and at least 38 more were noted during the current survey. They were all the same type: a cross with an additional arm, although the orientation varied. The proliferation of these identical marks suggests they may have been made to identify the blocks destined for the Conduit House building. The stone may have been transported to the nearby stone yard on Goswell Lane (now Water Lane) where it was marked up. Whether this also represented the mark of a particular mason is not known. Four examples of a larger, more flattened cross shape were also found, which could be a different mason's mark, but more likely are later marks made to indicate locations. These four flattened crosses were all on the south side of the vault.



Graffiti made once the building was in use consists of names, initials, and dates, left by visitors. The two most prominent examples are on the north side, one made by R. Biggs, a plumber working there, who carefully incised his name, his occupation as **Plur** (a shortened form of plumber) with date 1850.



Above: Example of Masons' mark.
 Right: 'R Biggs Plur' 1850. Photos – K Wardley

An online search of Southampton directories and census records found several references to Robert Charles Biggs. Born in St Mary's c1830 he was living at 2 Charlotte Place, Northam Street, as a plumber, painter and glazier in 1861 and 1863, and listed as a plumber and painter in 1871 and 1876, living at 2&3 Northam St. By 1881 he had moved to Watford Villa, Burgess St, Highfield, living with his wife, daughter-in-law and servant. There is no listing of him as a tradesman in 1887 but he appears as retired plumber at 3 Fleming Place, Highfield in 1891, his last entry in the directory.

J Wedge (or JW Edge), who left his name in 1876, may well have been the plumber and gas fitter, James Wedge, who appears in the 1891 Winchester census, aged 46, living with his wife and 8 children at 1 Jubilee Villas, St Faiths, Winchester. Further documentary research may tell us about the work these men were carrying out.



A number of sets of initials were found, including TW on the lintel over the east doorway. The form of the W suggests a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century date.

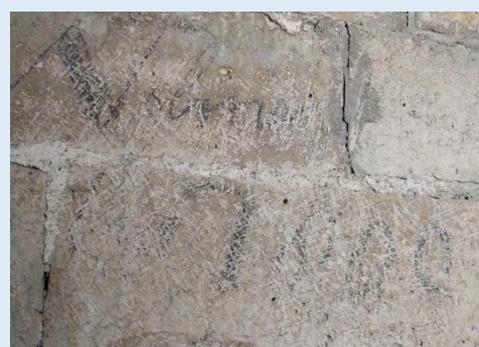
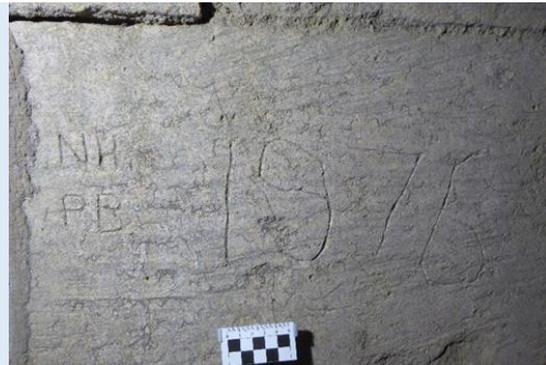
The initials TH and IO occur next to each other on the south side (*not illustrated*). The form of the H also suggests a pre-modern date.

Left: 'T W' on interior lintel of east doorway.

Below: Initials 'N H' & 'P B' with date 1976.

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On the north side a pair of initials, NH and PB, have a date 1976 incised next to them although these inscriptions may not be contemporary. Another inscription 'BLUE 2003' may have been made when the building was broken into and used by rough sleepers.



Besides incised graffiti,

there were initials BC in white paint, overlying earlier traces of black paint which occurred in several other areas around the vault. This could be clearly identified as lettering in an area on the north-west part of the vault. However, although individual letters could be seen, no words or names could be

deciphered. One word, beginning with an elaborate W seemed to be associated with a date, 1800 (*see left*).

Sources

Effemey, June, *Conduit House, Southampton*. University of Oxford Historic building analysis and Recording Module for Postgraduate Certificate in Architectural History, 2015/16

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