

If Walls Could Talk: recent discoveries by Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project

Talk given to SAS members by Karen Wardley on 14.09.21

The Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project started about five years ago, along with many regions in the UK, where volunteers often from local history groups survey and record graffiti in medieval churches. Graffiti is a formerly neglected source of information regarding vernacular beliefs and individual stories, now widely recognised and researched by national bodies such as English Heritage and National Trust. The brief has widened to include secular buildings, and also post-medieval graffiti and more modern unofficial marks, as well as marks made by carpenters and masons to assist in construction. To carry out a survey access to all parts of the building is required, and photographs are taken with raking light to highlight the marks. Sixty surveys have been completed in Hampshire so far, and Karen showed some examples to illustrate her talk.

The Conduit House, Water Lane, Southampton.



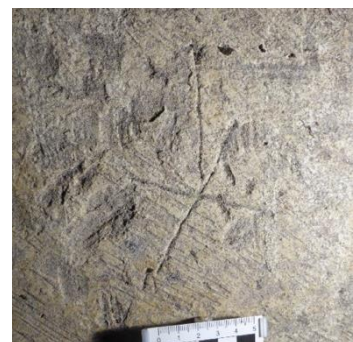
The survey was carried out early in June 2021 by intrepid members of SAS graffiti team. The small building was hot and stuffy, very dark and evidently infested with rats. The building dates from 1434 as part of the system to supply piped water for the town, and continued in use until the 19th century. A survey in the 1980s by the City Council's archaeology service (now the Archaeology Unit) noted 17 mason's marks, while another 38 were found by the graffiti team in June: the stones were marked before being brought to the site for construction.

Above: The Conduit House, Water Lane.

Right: Medieval mason's mark.

Photos – K Wardley

Some tradesmen's names were also noted in the recent survey, such as 'R. Biggs plur 1860' (ie plumber) who was identified in several census and trade directory records for Southampton; and another plumber 'J. Wedge 1876', possibly of Winchester; plus a modern mark: 'Blue 2003' – a rough sleeper?



St Cross, Winchester. This survey has already taken three years' work, with a total of 5000 photographs as so much graffiti was found in the medieval church and its associated outbuildings, which include 15th century almshouses. Karen spent much of the 2021 lockdown in analysing the results, and the group have produced a Graffiti Trail for St Cross. Marks have been found on the church furniture as well as in all areas of the building: for instance a Renaissance prayer desk in the choir which is covered in names, some very finely incised.



Above: Graffiti including the name of Walter Cheyny
 Right: Renaissance prayer desk in the choir at St Cross.

Photos – K Wardley

The name of 'Walter Cheyny' has been identified with a singer and musician ('lay vicar') who later sang in Winchester Cathedral. Other named singers seemed to have moved on to Salisbury Cathedral as well, and possibly St Cross encouraged the use of music and singing at a time when the early reformation church disapproved of its use in services. A graffito drawing of a carriage and horse, featuring a man on horseback holding a pistol probably dates to the 17th or 18th century (*not illustrated*).

The upper areas of the church at St Cross feature many marks left by workmen (ancient and modern) eg 'W. Laishley F. Andrews – lead lights August 1817', with over 70 dated names from the 19th/20th centuries. One family name which occurred many times was Newman, and Fred Newman worked there with other members of the family building firm, eventually becoming a 'brother' living in the almshouses. Two wooden carts from their firm, based at St Cross, are among the collections cared for by Hampshire Cultural Trust.

St Mary's Church, Ashley.

The village is located between Winchester and Stockbridge and the church features 13th century wall paintings, with multiple forms of graffiti. Around the South doorway and the chancel arch are numerous incised crosses. Karen referred to a 12th century MS which speaks of a devout woman making the mark of a cross in a church, as a symbol of her faith and chastity (see below).



St Mary's Church, Ashley, Hampshire. Photo – K Wardley



Crosses marked on the stone door frame. Photo – K Wardley



Hexfoils or 'daisy wheel' ritual protection marks.

Photo – K Wardley

This church also featured 'daisy wheels', apotropaic marks of ritual protection also called a 'hexfoil', drawn with compass or dividers, which were thought to keep out the devil (even in a church). Such symbols continued in use in domestic settings after the reformation, their religious symbolism probably forgotten. Other marks included heraldic shields and 'pentagram' symbols (a five-pointed star, said to represent the five wounds of Christ). On the chancel arch is a Latin inscription dated to 1550 (the reign of Edward VI) which was written in 'dog' Latin and hard to decipher or to translate: it was found to refer to an Act of Parliament condemning images and paintings in churches, and appears to record that the paintings had been whitewashed as decreed and sculptures destroyed (or hidden away). These paintings have been revealed and restored since those days, and we have come to value such early images and devotional symbols, as marks made by individuals who had no other memorial of their lives.

From March 2020 until summer 2021 the project was paused under Covid-19 restrictions, but the members are now active again. New members are very welcome to join, and if you're interested in taking part in the surveys, either in Hampshire or Southampton, Karen Wardley can be contacted via medieval-graffiti@hantsfieldclub.org.uk.

Sarah Hanna