



**Medieval Merchant's House,  
58 French Street, Southampton SO14 2AT**

Grid Ref: SU419111

**Graffiti Survey summary**



A graffiti survey of the Medieval Merchant's House was carried out on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021 by the following members of the HMGP and the Southampton Archaeology Society graffiti team: Ron Brading, Matt Garner, Karen Parker, Zana Parker, Julian Porter, Brian and Joan Webb and Karen Wardley. This followed a preliminary site visit by Karen Parker and Karen Wardley on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

The survey recorded graffiti and other marks made both during the construction process and later.

### **Medieval Merchant's House: a brief description**

The building is a Grade I Listed building and a Scheduled Monument, No. 26711, managed and maintained by English Heritage. The house is dated to the late 13<sup>th</sup> century on stylistic grounds, confirmed by dendrochronology. Documentary evidence suggests it was built for a wealthy merchant, John Fortin. It is orientated east-west, and is typical of the long, thin merchants' houses which lined the streets of the medieval town. It comprises a vaulted cellar, entered by steps from the street, above which lies an entrance passage leading to a shop and living accommodation, which on the ground floor comprises the hall or principal room of the house and a more private inner room. On the upper floor, above the shop and inner room, are two substantial bedchambers linked by a gallery across the hall.

The west end of the house was rebuilt after the collapse of the south-west corner of the building and internal alterations were carried out from the 16th century onwards. In 1940 it was damaged by a bomb. Investigations carried out by English Heritage between 1983 and 1985 revealed the extent of the surviving medieval structure and subsequent restoration by Hutchinson & Partners from 1986 to 1988 returned the house to its medieval appearance.

### **Graffiti summary and discussion**

Earlier reports made by English Heritage during the restoration work referred to some graffiti and other marks, so efforts were made to locate and report on these.

**Exterior** The exterior south wall consists of much re-used masonry and brick. This may have come from other buildings in the area, for example St John's church.

Some of these stone blocks have marks on them, including a triangular shape which, from its regularity and neatness, seems likely to be a mason's mark. (Fig 1)



*Fig 1 Exterior south wall. Mason's mark*



Fig 2 East wall, south side of doorway. Boxed initials PA

A fainter incised shape was found on a block on the west jamb of the south doorway. On the east side of the house, on the wall south of the east doorway, is some *in situ* graffiti. This consists of boxed initials PA (Fig 2). On the south side of the doorway arch is a much-weathered shape which could be the remains of the fleur-de-lys mentioned in

an earlier report as a *fleur de lys on ashlar within the entrance hall/passage*. (Fig 3)



Fig 3 East doorway, south side, possible fleur-de-lys

On the south side of the arch over the east door, and on the jamb of the south doorway are the neatly inscribed dated initials: A.M. 1985. (Fig 4) The Site Manager was informed by former Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Glyn Coppack, that these initials stood for Ancient Monuments, and related to work completed in that year.

### Interior

Very few examples of graffiti were found inside the building. The main walls of the house are built of limestone, mainly Bembridge stone, although Purbeck stone was used for 14th century alterations. The lower part of the north wall and all of the cellar are built of coursed squared ashlar, but the remainder of the building comprises random rubble set in a mass of mortar. All these surfaces have been limewashed, so any graffiti traces on the walls which had survived the restoration work have been mostly obscured. The timber framework of the



Fig 4 South doorway, Ancient Monuments inscription. A.M.1985

building, including the half bay at the street frontage has had later layers of paint and limewash removed, so construction and other marks cut into the timbers are clearly visible.

### Ground floor

No graffiti was found in the central or hall room. Carvings on the north and south corbels in the most westerly inner room were recorded, although these were not considered to be true graffiti. The south corbel has carvings on two adjacent faces consisting of a flag shape, and an arrow with a horizontal line above it. (Figs 5, 6)



*Fig 5 Inner room, south corbel, flag shape*



*Fig 6 Inner room, south corbel, arrow*

Traces of blue paint are also visible. An earlier English Heritage report recorded this as follows: *Merchant marks on the south corbel within the ground floor inner chamber*. The north corbel has indistinct faint scratches on both faces (Fig 7), with a decorative foliage motif on the underside and traces of earlier paint.



*Fig 7 Inner room, north corbel, scratches and paint*

Some modern graffiti was found on the ceiling timbers of the passageway between the shop and hall. This comprises geometric shapes, possibly representing a building, drawn in red and white chalk. (Fig 8)



*Fig 8 Passageway ceiling, modern chalk graffiti*

Although no graffiti was found in the front room or shop, the carpenters' assembly marks on the original ceiling joists were recorded. These run in order across the ceiling from south to north, as V, VI, VII, VIII, IIII, X, XI, but with a crossed VII on the first, most southerly joist. (Fig 9) There are no matching marks on the truss, but this had been partly replaced with modern timber.



*Fig 9 Shop. X-shaped carpenter's assembly mark on ceiling joist*

### **First floor**

The front bedchamber yielded two very interesting marks on the tie beams of Trusses B and C (the trusses are labelled alphabetically from the east window, working west). These had been described in earlier reports as "signatures". The mark on Truss B was described as a "b", presumably due to the double loop on the vertical element of the mark. The mark on truss C was referred to as a "similar mark" but in fact is quite different. From their characteristic form, it would seem more appropriate to refer to these as merchant marks.

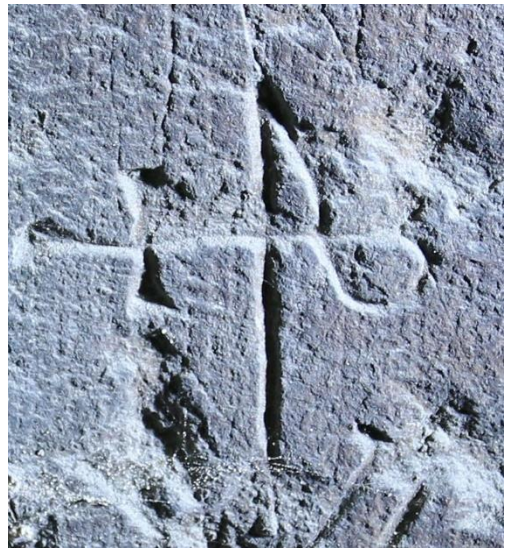
Merchant marks have been found as graffiti in other Southampton buildings, such as



Tudor House, where there is one on the ground floor back corridor, incised into the timber frame near the side door (Fig 10), and there are more upstairs, incised into the plaster walls of the rooms overlooking St Michael's Square. There are also some on the inner arch of the Bargate. (Fig 11).

*Fig 10 Tudor House, Southampton. Ground floor corridor, merchant mark*

These marks were used to identify ownership of personal goods and merchandise and were also often used instead of signatures on documents, so were an accepted means of personal identification. In England, they are found on seals and documents by the end of the 13th century and on funerary brasses from the mid-14th century onwards. They were in widespread use throughout the 15th and 16th centuries (Walsh, 1993).



*Fig 11 Southampton Bargate, inner arch. Merchant mark*



*Fig 12 Front bedchamber. Truss B. Merchant mark, base with extended arm*



*Fig 13 Front bedchamber. Truss B. Merchant mark, top. Reversed 4 shape*

The mark on the east face of the Truss B tie beam (Figs 12, 13) is 2.07m from the north wall. It is above head height, so, assuming floor levels are unchanged, it is in an awkward location to leave a mark. It has the standard vertical upright, with a double looped shape on the RHS and a central circle above this. At the top is the reversed 4 shape which, as well as a normal 4 shape, is found on the majority of merchant marks. It has the characteristic inverted V base, made of curved lines, but one arm extends and has 2 arcs incised across it. If this is part of the original mark it is a very unusual feature. Examples are known of marks being modified when passed on, eg by father to son, so this could be an explanation. Equally, it may be another piece of overlapping graffiti. Merchant marks often incorporated the owner's initials so the double loop could be intended as an initial B, although a study of

photographs taken of the mark, lit from different angles, shows that the loops seem independent of the upright.



*Fig 14. Bedchamber, tie beam, Truss C*

The mark on the Truss C tie beam (Figs 14, 15) has 2 diagonal lines, known as “streamers” coming from the top of the vertical upright on the LHS. This is another common form of merchant mark. The vertical upright stands on an inverted V base, this time composed of straight lines, with a central circle at the junction.

The different forms of these two marks suggest they belong to different people. The similar locations may be significant. The height of the marks suggests they could have been incised on the beams before the timber framework was assembled.

The location of the two marks is shown on Plan 1.



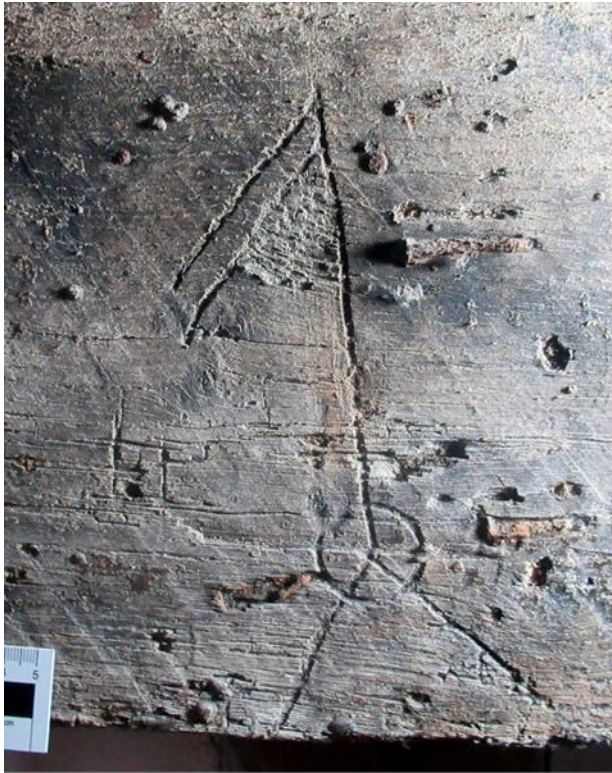


Fig 15. Bedchamber, tie beam, Truss C. Merchant mark

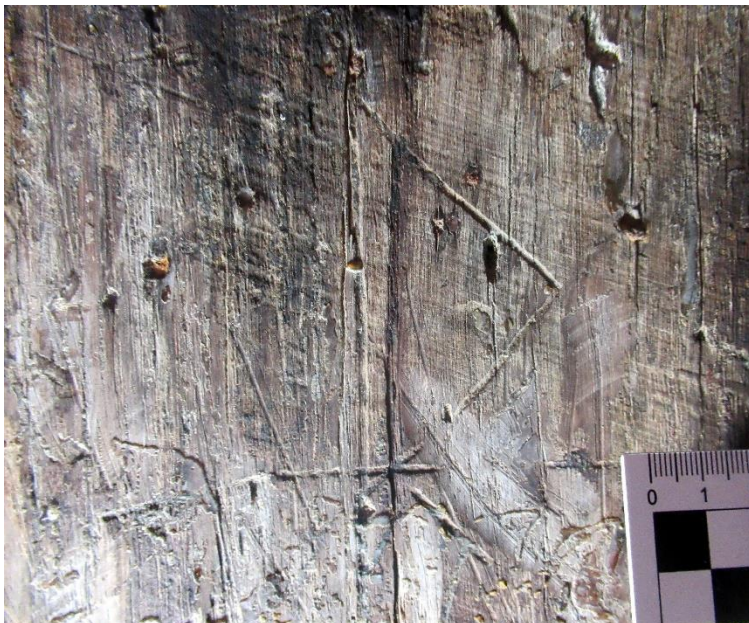


Fig 16 Bedchamber, East window, south side. Lines and shapes

Further marks were noted scratched into the timber stud on the south side of the east window. These consist of overlapping lines and shapes (Fig 16) which may be the marks described in the earlier report as an *inverted black letter 'a' on the inner face of the southern stud against the window.*

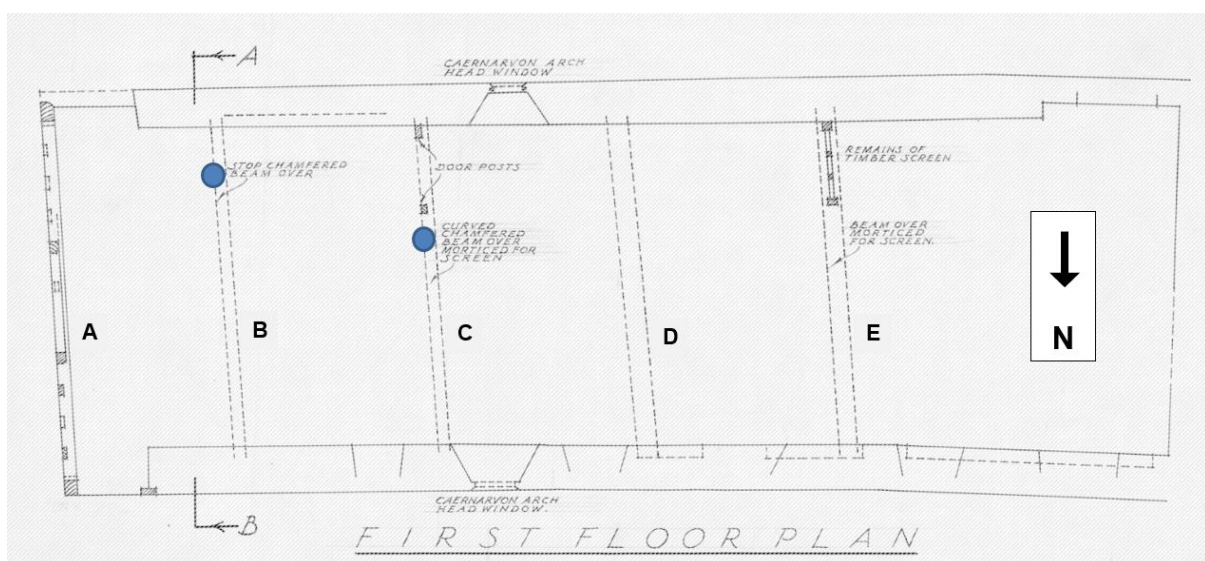
Graffiti found in domestic buildings of this date often include what are thought to be apotropaic or ritual protection marks, to prevent the ingress of evil spirits through openings such as doors, windows, and chimneys. Examples of these can be seen at Tudor House, in the form of six-petalled rosettes or “daisy wheels”. However, no

marks like this were found here, although the scratched marks by the window might have been made to serve this function.

Also recorded were marks known as ritual burn marks. These tear-shaped burn marks are often thought to have been caused accidentally by candles or tapers, and indeed replica iron sconces for tapers now form part of the house's fittings. However, the burn marks identified are not associated with any marks from earlier fittings, and experimental archaeology has demonstrated that many such burn marks were made systematically and deliberately, it is suggested as protection for the building, perhaps against fire (Dean & Hill, 2014). Two examples of these marks were found on the Truss C tie beam, one adjacent to the merchant mark, and another is on the Truss E tie beam, in the rear bedchamber, adjacent to an inverted V shape. (Fig 17)



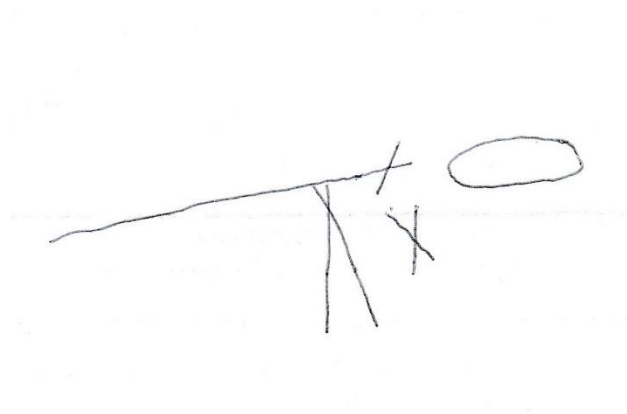
Fig 17 Burn mark on bedchamber tie beam, Truss E.



Plan 1. Location of merchant marks on tie beams of Trusses B and C

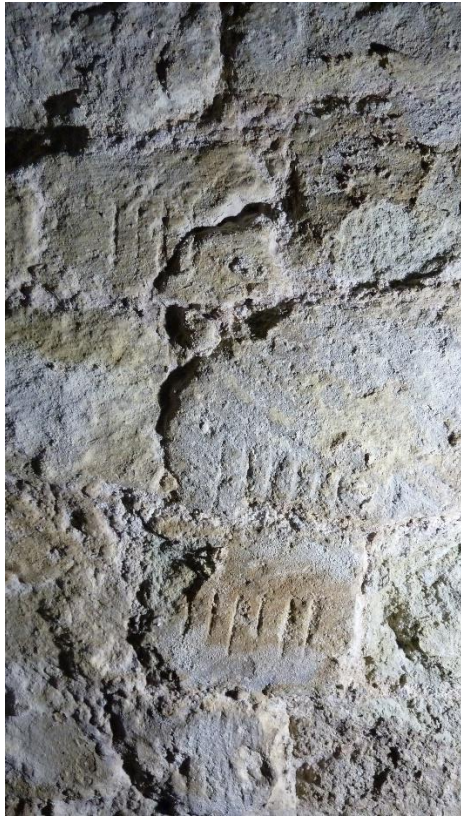
## The vault

The surface of many of the ashlar blocks forming the vault were obscured with dirt and layers of limewash, but graffiti was found on one block, consisting of incised lines forming cross shapes. A sketch was made of this (Fig 18). Its location, as V1, is shown on Plan 2.



*Fig 18 Vault. Sketch of graffiti in vault, V1*

Markings relating to the construction of the vault were found on several blocks. These consist of groups of incised vertical lines, the number of lines indicating the thickness of the stone. These marks were made by masons, presumably off site, to aid with the construction of the vault. (Fig 19). The location of these marks is shown on Plan 2, as V7.

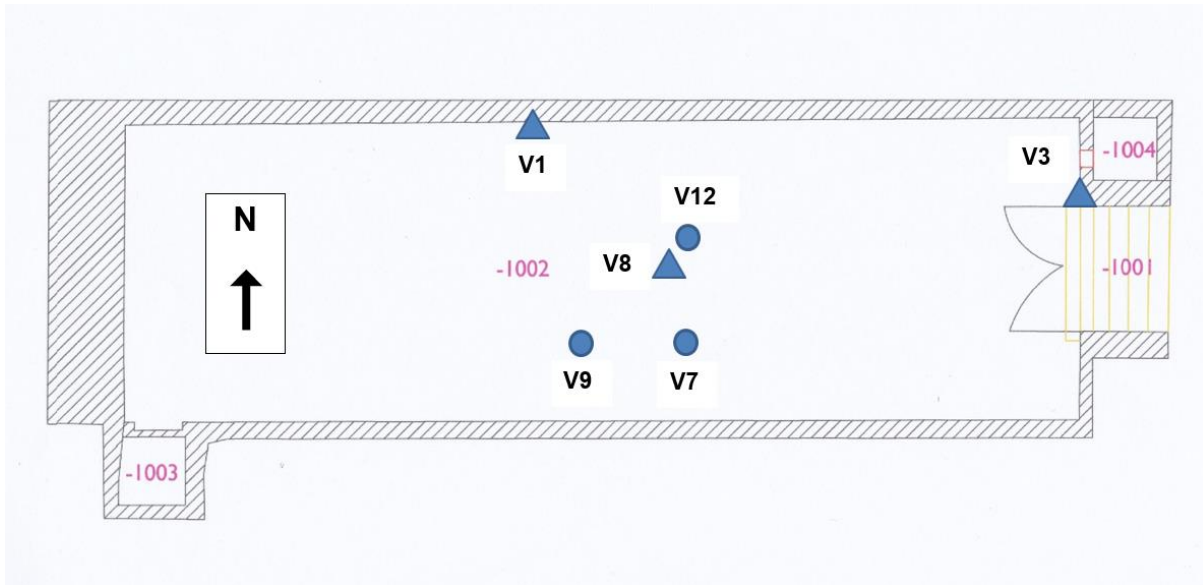


*Fig 19. Vault. Masons' construction marks, V7*

Measurements of the stones indicate the following correlation of marks and thicknesses:

<b>Drawn lines</b>	<b>No of lines</b>	<b>Stone thickness</b>
IIII	4	12cm
IIIII	5	14cm
IIIIII	6	16cm
IIIIIII	8	19 cm

Study of markings on the stonework in other medieval Southampton vaults, for example at neighbouring 48 French Street, have shown similar construction methods, with marks resembling Roman numerals used as systems of measurement.



Plan 2. Vault. Location of graffiti V1 and masons' marks V7

## Acknowledgements

HMGP is grateful to English Heritage for allowing access to the House, specifically to Fern Middleton, Site Manager, for opening the house specially for our visit, and to Samantha Stones, Properties Curator (South) for furnishing us with building plans and information from previous reports.

## Sources

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## Survey archive

A total of 107 photographs were taken during the surveys. All images and record sheets are held by the Hampshire Field Club Medieval Graffiti Project archive and are available on request. A copy of this report has been lodged with the Southampton City Council Historic Environment Record.

**Disclaimer**

This document has been prepared for the titled project or named part hereof and should not be relied upon or used for any other project or assessment without the permission of the Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project or English Heritage.

**Karen Wardley****20<sup>th</sup> December 2021**