



St Nicolas church, North Stoneham

Summary of historical graffiti surveys carried out in 2016 and 2019

The surveys

A survey of the church building was carried out by the Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project on 18th October 2016. Another survey took place on 14th November 2019, by Southampton Archaeology Society members, specifically to record any graffiti on the church pews, which were due to be disposed of as part of a major refurbishment programme. Additional areas of the church, which had been inaccessible in 2016, were also recorded, including the organ casing.

The results

The church structure

Most of the graffiti found in the church was located in the south porch, and on the most westerly columns of the north and south aisles. There was also a quantity in the tower, around the doorway to the stairs. Most of this graffiti consists of initials, some dated, the earliest being from the 17th century. There are two sets of boxed initials dated 1616 on the south aisle column, commemorating IK and TM. It is sometimes suggested that these more elaborate sets of dated initials were made to commemorate individuals, a memorial to those who could not afford a gravestone. Others were probably just left by those wishing to leave their mark.



1 Boxed initials IK dated 1616.
South aisle column

Crosses are often found as graffiti within churches, often left as symbols of personal prayer or devotion, but there are surprisingly few examples here. Another commonly found symbol, of which there is only one example at St Nicolas, is the compass-drawn “daisy wheel”. These are forms of ritual protection or apotropaic marks, which are often found in domestic and farm buildings, usually around windows and doorways, to protect occupants and contents against evil spirits and the Devil. It might seem strange to have such symbols within a Christian church, but the fear of the Devil was very strong, and these marks may represent a “belt and braces” approach to protection from evil. The example at St Nicolas, on the north aisle column, contains 4 lobes, forming a cross, and is similar to the design of consecration crosses which marked the places where the church was consecrated by the bishop with holy oil. This example however is too small, and not in the right



2 Compass-drawn cross, North aisle column

location to be a consecration cross. A group of interlaced compass-drawn circles were found on the same column, and may also have had an apotropaic function.

Other protective symbols are pairs of interlaced Vs, which were originally a sign of devotion to the Virgin Mary, VV standing for Virgo Virginum, or Virgin of the Virgins. These could be inverted, forming the letter M, which stood for Maria. Post-Reformation, these symbols continued in use for protective purposes, their original significance lost. There are some examples in St Nicolas, although they should not be confused with

the letter W, which was written in the same way, and often appears in sets of initials.



3 VV symbol. Tower doorway

A pentangle appears on the south aisle column, and although often equated with black magic today, these symbols were used in Christian iconography, both to entrap evil spirits and as a protection against them.

No masons' marks were identified, apart from a fine modern example, in the form of a leaf, within the porch.



4 Pentangle. South aisle column



5 Modern mason's mark. Porch

The pews and organ casing

The main focus of the 2019 survey was to examine the pews to ensure any graffiti which might be helpful for local or family history studies was recorded. The bulk of the pews in the nave date to the Bodley restoration of the late nineteenth century, but there are also some more modern pews in the aisles. In fact, hardly any graffiti was found on the pews, apart from a few individual letters and unidentifiable shapes. However, one of the pews, on the north side of the nave, seemed to be of a different construction to the others, and its book shelf did contain a quantity of graffiti, including initials and the date 1973, and the names of what must be football clubs (Southampton, Derby County, Leeds United and Liverpool), probably carefully inscribed during a lengthy sermon.



6 Football teams recorded on pew book shelf

The organ casing was also surveyed, as the organ may be disposed of during the second phase of refurbishment. Although apparently of little musical merit, it does carry a fine, painted dedication on one side (currently obscured by a curtain) which records its presentation to the church in 1936 to celebrate the reign of George V.



The back and the eastern side of the organ casing carry a lot of graffiti left by the teams of young men whose job it was to pump the organ bellows before the introduction of electricity. There are many initials and some dates from the 1950s, and a drawing of a man in collar and tie, wearing a jaunty hat with a feather. Was this the portrait of a member of the parish?



8 Sketch of man on organ casing

Behind the organ, on the window ledge, is the carefully carved inscription K. GUMMA, BLOWER 1955 June 21st. "Blower" is another term for those who pumped the organ, so even when this organ is removed, the graffiti recording its presence will remain in the church for posterity!



7 Inscription recording organ "blower" K. Gumma, June 21st 1955. North aisle window ledge, behind organ

Acknowledgements

The survey teams were made very welcome on both their visits, but special thanks must go to the Reverend Canon Norman Boakes who not only arranged access for the Southampton group, but also kindly provided us with tea and cakes.

Summaries of these surveys will be lodged with the Historic Environment Record, part of the local Planning Department, and put on to the websites of the Hampshire Field Club www.hantsfieldclub.org.uk and the Southampton Archaeology Society www.southamptonarchaeology.uk

The full survey records are held by the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeology Society. Copyright of the images remains with HFC.

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Below: Exterior and interior views of North Stoneham Church.

