

THE GRAFFITI INSCRIPTIONS OF ST MARY'S CHURCH, TROSTON

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SUMMARY

THE CHURCH OF St Mary, Troston, is perhaps best known for its superb series of medieval wall paintings, which are some of the finest in East Anglia.¹ However, a recent survey undertaken by members of the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey (NMGS) has demonstrated that the church also contains an unusually high number of pre- and post-Reformation graffiti inscriptions.² The survey revealed that the Troston graffiti were unusual both in their quantity and in the diversity of their subject matter, making this one of the most significant 'graffiti churches' yet discovered in the region.

INTRODUCTION

The study of church graffiti inscriptions has a long academic pedigree but, with a few notable exceptions, has been largely overlooked by modern scholars until very recent years.³ The reason for this lack of general interest in the subject may well be that, until very recent decades, the inscriptions were difficult to identify and even more difficult to record accurately. However, the advent of digital photography, image manipulation software and specialist lighting has now made the discovery and recording of such inscriptions far easier. Such techniques represent a considerable advance upon the traditional methods of taking a rubbing of the wall surface, and allow a relatively rapid and non-invasive survey to be undertaken in a wide variety of light conditions. Although the revival of interest in the study of church graffiti inscriptions has been made possible by the development of new technology, it has also begun to attract scholarly interest for the potential it has shown in illuminating a previously shadowy area of church history: the study of aspects of lay piety during the later Middle Ages.

For the vast majority of the inhabitants of the medieval parish the church building was the focus for both their social and religious life. It was a symbol of local pride, of Church authority and religious salvation. Whatever its geographical location within the parish, the church building formed the central core of parish life. Despite this centrality, we actually know very little of how these individuals, the lower orders of the congregation, interacted with the church as both a building and an institution. In some cases considerable written records do survive, but these are largely associated with traditional 'rites of passage' such as birth, marriage and death and, as such, can be regarded as atypical.⁴ They reflect the unusual rather than the commonplace, and give few hints as to how the parish inhabitants interacted with the building that played such a large part in their spiritual and social life. It has been shown that surviving church buildings can provide some indications of this relationship. However, in the vast majority of cases the medieval survivals that grace our places of worship were created for the parish elite. The stained glass, monumental brasses and alabaster effigies do not commemorate the lower orders that made up the bulk of the medieval population. Instead they are the elite monuments to the very highest levels of local society.

It is this recognition that traditional studies of church architecture, fixtures and fittings, can only be regarded as representing the piety and devotional practices of a small percentage of the medieval congregation that has contributed to the revival in the study of church graffiti

inscriptions. These inscriptions can, and do, take many forms and, as yet, the function and intended audience for many of them remain unclear and contested. However, what has become apparent is that these inscriptions may well have been created by all levels of the medieval congregation. Whilst it must be accepted that a graffiti inscription written in Latin and executed in a practised hand is unlikely to have been made by any other than the elite or clerical classes, such inscriptions remain in the minority. The vast majority of the inscriptions discovered to date could have been created by almost any member of the medieval congregation and, as such, they represent an opportunity to shed light upon a number of areas of lay piety that have left few material records elsewhere. Such inscriptions have the potential to be the windows into the souls of the medieval parishioners.

The Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey (NMGS) was established in January 2010 with the aim of undertaking the first systematic large-scale survey of pre-Reformation graffiti inscriptions in the country. The project is run as a volunteer-led community archaeology project and records all its findings with the county Historic Environment Record. The success of the initial project has led to the development of a number of similar groups, which all operate with the guidance and support of the NMGS and utilise its established infrastructure. In the summer of 2011 the NMGS undertook a small number of surveys in Suffolk with a view to the establishment of a sister organisation within the county, which was begun in January 2014. Rather than attempting to catalogue all of the findings made at Troston, many of which were badly eroded and largely indecipherable, this article presents a short summary of some of the more significant and evocative discoveries.

ST MARY'S, TROSTON



FIG. 87 – The superb 15th-century porch of the church of St Mary, Troston.

Although St Mary's was heavily restored in 1869, when the original thatch was removed from both nave and chancel, the work was relatively sympathetic for the period, leaving much of the church generally undisturbed (Fig. 87). The earliest section to survive largely intact is the early thirteenth-century chancel, with its original lancets and three-light east window. In about 1300 the tower was erected, with the nave connecting tower to chancel being added shortly afterwards. This unusual building chronology is actually evidenced in the structure today, most notably where the nave connects with the tower, actually wrapping its fabric around the form of an already extant buttress. Finally, the magnificent south porch, decorated with flushwork, was added in the

fifteenth century. The interior of the church was much altered during the nineteenth-century restoration. Most notably the roof was provided with a timber ‘wagon’ ceiling and the walls of the nave were panelled to a height of approximately 1200mm.⁵ However, the restoration left much of the original pre-Reformation plaster intact and thereby preserved the medieval wall paintings. Indeed, it is assumed that the paintings were actually rediscovered at this period – thus ensuring the original plaster surface survived. Unusually, large areas of the porch interior also appear to contain the original plaster surface.

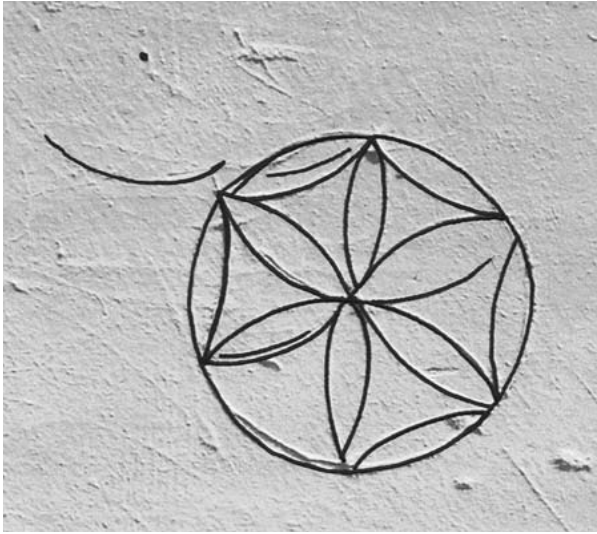
METHOD

The survey of the church interior was undertaken in a variety of light conditions over a period of three visits during the summers of 2011 and 2012. The church was chosen for the survey simply because graffiti inscriptions were already known to be present within the structure, and the soft construction material of the chancel and tower arches made it likely that further graffiti were present. Initial identification of graffiti inscriptions was undertaken visually using a variety of raking light sources. Each identified inscription was then recorded using digital imagery, with each example being photographed on at least four occasions using a different angled light source for each image. The final scaled survey was undertaken using offset 300-watt halogen lamps. The resulting images were then overlaid with each other, using computer imaging software, resulting in a ‘complete’ image of each inscription. These inscriptions were then recorded using traditional techniques.

GRAFFITI INSCRIPTIONS

The most notable feature of the graffiti inscriptions discovered at Troston is their location within the church building. In the vast majority of East Anglian churches that contain significant pre-Reformation graffiti inscriptions, the bulk of these are invariably located upon the arcade piers. However, St Mary’s has no aisles and, perhaps as a direct result, almost all the graffiti are located on the tower and chancel arches. These two arches are constructed of a relatively soft stone, perhaps also making them naturally attractive sites for inscriptions – a phenomenon that has been noted at a number of other East Anglian sites.⁶ The only other area within the church that contains significant graffiti survivals is the interior of the porch, where large areas of surviving medieval plaster have been heavily inscribed with a number of images and motifs. Although unusually large areas of medieval plaster also survive within the nave, being largely responsible for the survival of the medieval wall paintings, no early graffiti inscriptions have been identified in these areas by either the graffiti survey or wall painting conservation teams. However, the wall paintings survive only in the upper sections of the nave walls, the lower sections having been covered with wooden panelling during the nineteenth-century restoration. In common with other sites, most notably the Prior’s Chapel at Durham Cathedral, any graffiti inscriptions would most likely have been located in these lower areas.⁷ Whilst medieval wall paintings have been noted as acting as focuses for devotional graffiti inscriptions, such as the fourteenth-century St Christopher image at Swannington, Norfolk, any such distribution pattern at Troston has been obscured by the insertion of the wooden panelling. How much medieval plaster surface remains in place behind the panelling is a matter of speculation.

Although tower arches attracted graffiti in a large number of East Anglian churches, such as Sedgford (Norfolk) and Lidgate (Suffolk), the sheer quantity found at Troston is worthy of note. In addition, Troston also contains a large number of inscriptions located upon the chancel arch, which has been shown to be a far rarer practice within East Anglian churches,



ABOVE:
FIG. 88 – The ‘daisy wheel’ on the face of the
chancel arch facing the nave.



being recorded at only a handful of sites such as Ludham and Brisley (Norfolk). The division between chancel and nave is well attested within medieval church records, with the nave being the domain of the parish whilst the chancel was the responsibility of the priest or patron, and this avoidance of the chancel area may well indicate that graffiti were most usually created in areas that might be considered ‘public’. This boundary between public and elite space within the building, delineated by the insertion of chancel screens throughout the later Middle Ages (usually at the cost of the congregation or individual members thereof) would appear to have been a spiritual as well as physical division.⁸ However, at Troston this boundary appears unusually to have been crossed, and the way in which the graffiti are distributed on the chancel arch is more unusual still. Although, as previously stated, graffiti inscriptions are occasionally recorded upon chancel arches, they are most usually located upon the western face, the nave or ‘public’ side, of the stonework. At Troston the nave side of the arch contains only one single motif, a compass-drawn six-petal rosette, commonly known as a ‘daisy wheel’ (Fig. 88), whilst the eastern, or chancel, side of the arch is an overlapping mass of graffiti that is so dense that much of it now defies interpretation (Fig. 89). Whilst it is tempting to speculate that such inscriptions in the chancel might represent an attempt to place the graffiti in closer proximity to an area of heightened spiritual value, as has been recorded at sites such as

FIG. 89 – A detail of a section of the east face of the chancel arch, south side, illustrating the mass of overlying graffiti inscriptions that cover the surface.

Blakeney on the north Norfolk coast, there is no direct evidence that this was the case at Troston.⁹

FIGURES

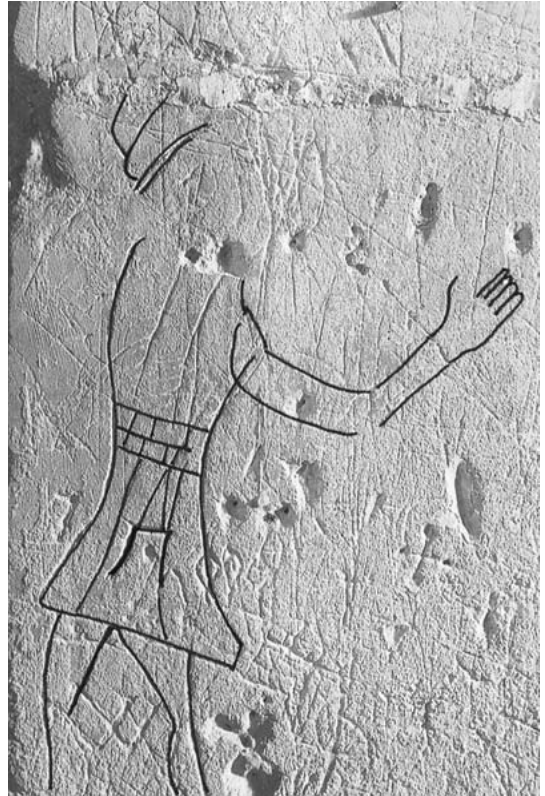
Troston church appears to contain an unusually large number of full-length figures, with at least four complete and reasonably high quality examples being recorded during the survey, as well as numerous less well executed and more discrete examples. At least two of these higher quality examples, one from the tower arch and another from the chancel arch, contain enough detail in the way their clothing is depicted to date them firmly to the late fourteenth or early/mid fifteenth century. These two examples, one male and one female, are both depicted in attitudes of prayer and are associated with a number of ritual protection symbols and ‘apotropaic’ markings. The clear implication is that these full-length figures were created with a religious or ritual purpose and may well be regarded as pictorial prayers in their own right.

The female figure is located on the north-western face of the tower arch, in an area of heavily concentrated graffiti inscriptions that make it difficult to determine if the figure was meant to be seen alone, or as part of a larger and more complex scheme (Fig. 90). In the immediate vicinity can also be made out at least three other depictions of faces, two deer, and a number of early text inscriptions as well as numerous symbols and apotropaic markings. Most prominent amongst these markings is a five-pointed star, which sits directly behind the figure and appears likely to be associated with the image itself. The woman is shown in profile, with hands raised up before the face in an attitude of prayer, and is depicted wearing a full-length kirtle, wide belt and distinctive headdress.¹⁰ A second probably medieval figure is located on the north side of the chancel arch (Fig. 91). This image, which appears to show a man dressed in short pleated gown, pointed shoes and hat or hood, is depicted facing in the direction of the altar and with hands raised in prayer. This inscription has suffered far more damage than that recorded on the tower arch, with the face badly eroded and scored out. It is unclear if such defacement was deliberate.

The two other high quality full-length figures of note are located in close proximity to each other on the northern side of the tower arch. Both are deeply incised into the fabric and, from the form and shape of their clothing, may well date from the second half of the sixteenth century (Fig. 92). However, beyond the outlines and basic shapes no detail appears to be present. It is assumed that they were designed to represent adult male figures.

TEXT INSCRIPTIONS

Compared to other East Anglian churches that have so far been surveyed, Troston contains an unusually large number of textual inscriptions. The vast majority of post-Reformation examples, as found elsewhere, are largely confined to initials and dates. In all but a few very notable examples, the inclusion of dates in graffiti inscriptions does not begin to appear until the middle decades of the sixteenth century, only becoming a commonplace phenomenon in the opening decades of the seventeenth century. Whilst this may just be the result of changing conventions and traditions, in particular the move away from dating by regnal year also paralleled in documentary records, it does suggest that for many of the earlier creators of inscriptions the actual date was of little importance or relevance to the inscription itself. The pre-Reformation text examples at Troston, somewhat unusually, display a high proportion of full and recognisable or partly recognisable names. Although none of these is accompanied by a convenient date, the palaeographic evidence, combined with external documentary sources,



TOP LEFT:

FIG. 90 – Tower arch, north side. Full-length figure of a woman shown with hands raised in prayer. This image clearly shows the multiple images that have been inscribed on the surface, making individual interpretations extremely challenging.

TOP RIGHT:

FIG. 91 – Chancel arch, north side. Full-length figure of a man again shown with hands raised in prayer.

BOTTOM LEFT:

FIG. 92 – Tower arch, north side. One of the two unusual full-length figures tentatively dated to the late 16th century.

BOTTOM RIGHT:

FIG. 93 – The name 'Sarsted' on the east face of the chancel arch.



FIG. 96 – Chancel arch, north side. The name of God inscribed into the fabric of the church.

derived from the first three letters of Christ's name written in Greek, which was frequently used as both an invocation and a protection, and is even today still referred to as the 'holy monogram'. Similarly, on the north side of the chancel arch, amidst a mass of inscribed lines and overlapping inscriptions, the monogram DEO, Latin for God, clearly stands out (Fig. 96). These Christian monograms clearly suggest that these text inscriptions were applied to the stonework with a devotional intent. However, exactly what the intended function was, whether seeking protection, asking for aid or in thanksgiving remains unclear. Similarly ambiguous inscriptions have been identified in numerous East Anglian churches, such as at Litcham, Swannington, Worlington, Lidgate and Ludham, where their lack of clear context has meant that any attempts at interpretation, beyond the fact that they are devotional in nature, have been severely limited.

COMPASS-DRAWN DESIGNS

In common with most other churches in which pre-Reformation graffiti inscriptions are to be found, Troston contains a number of compass-drawn motifs. Such compass-drawn designs can take a number of forms, of which the simplest is a single circle in the church fabric.¹⁴ Other extremely common variations include the six-petal flower motif, a series of concentric circles resembling a bulls-eye, and a circular compass-drawn cross – or any combination of the above. At Troston examples of all these variations were discovered, with a pair of particularly complex designs located facing each other on opposite sides of the tower arch (Fig. 97).

These various compass-drawn motifs represent the single most commonly recorded type of inscription in medieval churches, with many hundreds of individual examples recorded in the churches surveyed by the NMGS. At present there are three theories that present possible explanations for this phenomenon, although no single theory can be regarded as explaining the presence of all these inscriptions.¹⁵ One of the earliest theories, put forward by T.D. Atkinson as early as 1905, suggested that these circular images might have been related to the

time a lack of male issue saw it pass to John's daughters and co-heirs. It would appear from the style of the lettering, which shows remarkable similarities to that of the cryptogram from All Saints, Litcham, in Norfolk, that one of the earlier Johns may well have been the author of the inscription still seen in the church today (Fig. 95).¹³ However, exactly why such an individual, who was clearly amongst the more prosperous local inhabitants and parish elite, decided to inscribe his name on the tower arch must remain a mystery.

Although many of the inscribed names that have been recorded at Troston may well be either memorial or territorial in nature, as evidenced by John Abthorpe's name on the tower arch, a number of the textual inscriptions are also clearly devotional. On the north side of the tower arch is a very clear IHS monogram, a traditional Christian motif

sites of consecration crosses.¹⁶ Although evidence from surviving consecration crosses, such as those at Great Walsingham, Redenhall, Little Dunham and Colton (Norfolk), clearly shows that many of them were laid out using compasses or dividers prior to painting, the sheer number of examples of inscribed circular designs identified by the NMGS and others, and their diverse locations within churches, has now largely disproved this theory (Fig. 98).¹⁷ However, in a number of specific cases this theory may well have some validity.

Until recently a number of academics strongly argued that the compass-drawn designs were solely the work of the medieval masons themselves. It was argued that these designs, in particular the 'daisy wheel', were used by the masons to teach their apprentices the basic geometric principles behind their craft. Whilst the design is indeed well suited to such a task, and there are examples of compass-drawn devices that are undoubtedly the work of masons, this theory has most generally fallen out of favour as an explanation for the vast majority of such inscriptions. In the first instance the sheer number of compass-drawn inscriptions recorded to date, with several dozen examples appearing in churches such as Litcham, Lidgate and Bedingham, would suggest that the phenomenon was far more widespread than it would be if confined to a single craft guild. In addition, many of the motifs are far more complex than the simple 'daisy wheels', such as the elaborate compositions found at South Elmham, Ludham, Bedingham, Norwich Cathedral, Swannington, Sedgeford and Lidgate, and would have required a good deal of practice to produce – and yet would have been of far less practical use in demonstrating any geometric principles than the far simpler and easier to produce designs. Lastly, and perhaps most tellingly, medieval masons used a number of similar variants to demonstrate the basic geometric principles, as evidenced by a number of surviving manuscript works, and yet these designs are not recorded in church graffiti.¹⁸

The third possible interpretation of these symbols, and one that has become generally accepted as explaining the vast majority of them, is that these compass-drawn designs were created as 'apotropaic' or ritual protection marks. Designed to ward off the 'evil eye' and protect from malevolent forces, these symbols have recently become the subject of increased



FIG. 97 – Tower arch, north side. Complex compass-drawn design that may be related to the site of a former consecration cross. The surface has also become the focus for numerous apotropaic markings.



FIG. 98 – Raking light detail of the consecration cross from Colton church, Norfolk. Not only is the cross formed in the style of a ‘daisy wheel’, but the compass-drawn marking-out lines are still clearly visible in the medieval plaster.

study, particularly examples recorded in post-medieval vernacular buildings.¹⁹ One theory behind their function is that they act in a similar manner to the Solomon’s Knot, whereby an endless line entraps the evil forces within the symbol. At sites such as Swannington, where concentrations of such compass-drawn designs have been recorded around the original location of the font, the symbols may be linked to the baptism ceremony that specifically spoke of driving out evil from the unbaptised child. In certain churches, up until very recent times, it was the tradition to leave the north door ajar during baptisms to allow the evil spirits to exit the building

unhindered, and several churches contain small openings or doors on the north side still known as ‘Devil’s Doors’.²⁰ Although such a concentration around the font has so far been recorded at only a few sites in East Anglia, such an interpretation is perhaps supported by the number of surviving early fonts, such as the examples from Sculthorpe (Norfolk), Combe-in-Teignhead (Devon) and Buckland-in-the-Moor (Devon), that include the ‘daisy wheel’ symbol as a central part of their formal decoration.²¹

The number of compass-drawn designs recorded at Troston is not unusually high. Some are located on both the chancel arch and tower arch. However, the two most notable compass-drawn designs are to be found on the tower arch. Taking the form of a series of concentric circles, with a compass-drawn cross in the centre, the two motifs are all but identical and sit facing each other across the archway. The location of the motifs, their exact mirroring of each other and their form, would strongly suggest that they are indeed related to the sites of consecration crosses. Given that the church also contains several surviving painted consecration crosses it would appear likely that these inscribed designs were also originally painted as well. Intriguingly, beneath the motif on the north side of the arch are the remains of a much larger, although now incomplete, compass-drawn design. This too appears to originally have taken the form of a cross and may suggest multiple consecrations of the building, as noted at sites such as Great Walsingham. Losses to the surface of the stonework on the south side make it impossible to determine whether this second compass-drawn design was also present there. The tower arch motifs are now covered in a mass of other graffiti inscriptions, including a large number of apotropaic markings, which may have been drawn to that area by the presence of the consecration crosses themselves.

Of the other compass-drawn designs recorded in the church, the most notable is located on the western face of the chancel arch. Unusually, given the quantity of graffiti inscriptions recorded in the church, the western face of the chancel arch is all but devoid of inscriptions.

However, on the south side of the nave there is a single compass-drawn motif taking the form of a slightly elaborated ‘daisy wheel’ motif (Fig. 88). However in this case, rather than being just the simple six-petal design, the motif has additional compass-drawn segments located around the inner perimeter of the main circle. Although this elaboration upon the standard ‘daisy wheel’ design is by no means uncommon, the Troston example is less usual in the fact that one of the outer segments has been omitted. Such unfinished examples of these designs have been noted at numerous sites, including Wiveton and Norwich Cathedral, suggesting that the omission was a deliberate act rather than an oversight. The exact nature and symbolism of these inscriptions remains a matter of vigorous debate, as detailed above, but the prominence of this single example would suggest that it carried both meaning and function.

Numerous compass-drawn marks are to be found elsewhere in the building. However, on both the chancel and tower arches these take the form of either simple compass-drawn circles, or compass-drawn crosses. No significant distribution pattern has been noted to date.

MERCHANTS’ MARKS

The presence of inscribed merchants’ marks has been recorded in many dozens of churches across the region. These simple symbols or monograms were used by merchants to mark their goods and stock, and often appeared on merchants’ seals of the Middle Ages. They not only identified the goods as being the property of an individual but also acted as symbols of authentication and quality control.²² In cases such as Wiveton (Norfolk) the same merchant’s mark appears very prominently on each and every pier of the north arcade, deeply cut into the stone and directly at eye level, suggesting that the inscription may well be territorial in nature. In addition, it is worth remembering that, to those who viewed them, whether literate or not, these symbols would have been directly associated with an individual in much the same way as the inscribed names would have been. Indeed, with such a symbol, which may be thought of as comparable with a personal logo or monogram, the need for literacy was put aside. Whilst the symbol itself may well consist of letters, as at Troston, they were recognisable both as an image and as a readable series of text letters (Fig. 99).

MASONS’ MARKS

It is inevitable that the search for early graffiti inscriptions will also identify any masons’ marks on the surface of the stonework, and the survey at Troston identified a number of possible examples that are repeated at various locations throughout the church.²³ One symbol in particular stood out during



FIG. 99 – Tower arch, north side. Probable merchant’s mark inscribed in close proximity to the name of Johannes [John] Abthorp.

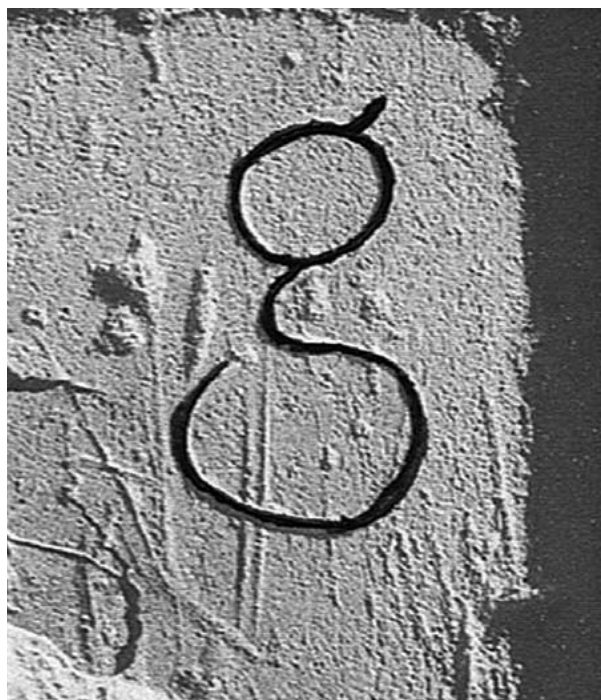


FIG. 100 – This clearly and precisely cut lower case ‘g’ is repeated all across the tower arch.

the survey due to the number of occasions it was recorded on the fabric of the tower arch. In form the symbol appeared to be a very well executed lower case letter ‘g’, and whilst it is similar to masons’ marks identified elsewhere, such as the rood loft doorway at Great Walsingham, those examples all appear to date from the very late fifteenth or early sixteenth century (Fig. 100). In the case of Troston, all the fabric of the tower arch and surrounding stonework is identified as being of a far earlier date. However, much of the stonework surrounding the tower arch was renewed or altered during the large-scale restoration in 1869, and it is to this period that this particular mason’s marks would appear to belong. The same mason’s mark has also been recorded by the NMGS as being present at the west end of St Peter Mancroft church, Norwich, which underwent a similar large-scale restoration in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is apparent that the

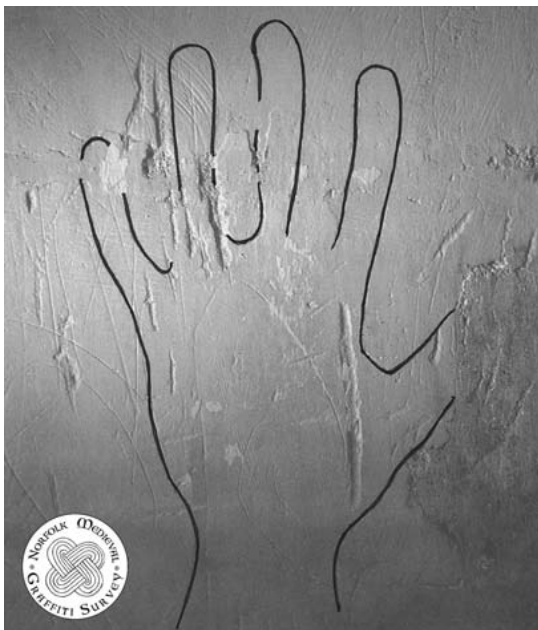
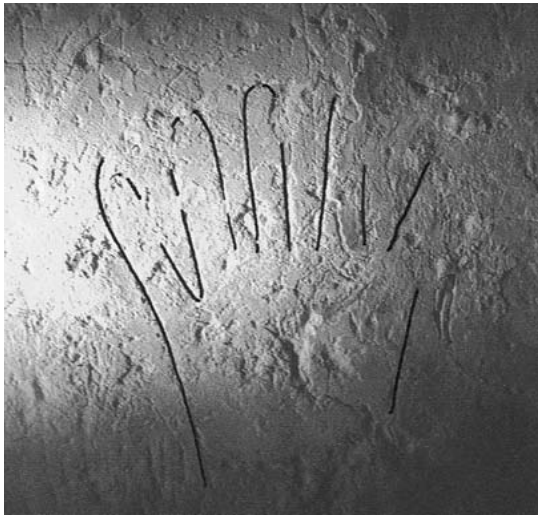
same mason worked on both Troston and St Peter Mancroft, although it has not yet been possible to identify the individual responsible.

Despite close examination of all the stone surfaces within the church, no possible masons’ marks from the pre-Reformation period could be identified. Whilst it might be the case that such earlier markings have been obscured by the wealth of later graffiti inscriptions, it has been noted that churches with clear and recordable individual masons’ marks actually represent a minority in the sites surveyed to date. Whereas some churches, such as Wighton, Salle and Litcham, may contain numerous examples of masons’ marks, other sites with almost identical construction histories appear to contain no visible markings. Exactly why this should be the case remains unclear.

HANDS/FEET/SHOES

Although inscriptions of hands, feet and shoes are relatively common in East Anglian churches such as Litcham (Norfolk), Ludham (Norfolk), Morston (Norfolk) and Cowlinge (Suffolk), the sheer quantity, and identifiable distribution patterns, present at Troston make the site worthy of note and further study. The phenomenon has been linked to the physically similar representations of many of the votive offerings left by pilgrims at the major medieval shrines of the period.²⁴ Such votive gifts to medieval shrines are well attested in a variety of forms. These offerings, known as ‘ex-voto’ items, were most often recorded as being models made of wax. By far the most common forms of offering, still seen in Catholic countries to this day, were images and models of parts of the body – often of the area that had been cured, or for which a cure was being sought.²⁵ Duffy, giving numerous accounts and instances of these ex-voto items, describes them as ‘a standard part of the furniture of a shrine’.²⁶ As well as acting as offerings and prayers of thanksgiving, these items served to advertise the particular saint’s efficacy and power.

The number of inscribed outlines of shoes recorded during the surveys is suggestive of a



widespread practice that, whilst clearly having origins in the medieval period, continued well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Such shoe images, whilst commonly recorded in church buildings, are also to be found inscribed into early bridges, gravestones and funerary monuments. At sites such as Canterbury Cathedral, the area of the cloister has been recorded as containing many dozens of separate shoe and foot

inscriptions that continued to be created until relatively recent decades. Whilst many of these may simply be the result of graffiti attracting other graffiti to a specific area, it is clear that the original inscriptions were placed there with deliberate intent. Whilst Gilchrist notes the medieval connections between shoe symbolism and the wedding ceremony, where brides were presented with shoes, or their fathers presented a shoe to the groom, symbolising the ‘transfer of male authority’, it is unclear whether any of the graffiti examples might have had a similar relationship to matrimony.²⁷

At Troston these inscriptions of shoes and hands were recorded in distinct concentrations in three

TOP LEFT:

FIG. 101 – One of three clear hand inscriptions located on the tower arch (north side). Approximately 1/8 actual size..

TOP RIGHT:

FIG. 102 – Chancel arch, south side. A clear depiction of a medieval shoe deeply incised into the fabric. Its relationship to the demon’s head is uncertain.

MIDDLE:

FIG. 103 – Porch, west side. One of a number of hands inscribed into the medieval plaster.

BOTTOM:

FIG. 104 – All Saints church, Litcham, Norfolk. A very clear hand inscription located in the south aisle, which appears to have been created by a right-handed individual.



FIG. 105 – Chancel arch, south side. The Troston demon, one of the most artistic and enigmatic graffiti recorded to date.

separate parts of the building. On the tower arch was discovered a collection of hand impressions, all of which were far smaller than actual size, and located on both the north and south sides (Fig. 101). On the chancel arch were two clearly identifiable inscriptions of shoes which, from their design, were clearly late medieval in origin. On the south side of the chancel arch, one of these inscriptions was cut unusually deeply into the stone surface and was located in close proximity to, and perhaps associated with, a small demon's head (Fig. 102). On the north side of the chancel arch a second shoe outline was recorded. However, the mass of graffiti inscriptions on this surface made the identification of individual inscriptions difficult,

and it is unclear if this second shoe inscription was associated with other elements. Indeed, the surface is so heavily inscribed that it is also unclear whether other shoe inscriptions may once have been present upon the surface.

The third, and by far the largest, concentration of these markings was recorded in the porch, where a great deal of the early plaster surface still survives. Close examination of this surface identified numerous outlines of human hands inscribed into the plaster (Fig. 103). Several of the hands depicted are clearly life-sized, and this suggests that they were created by inscribing around the outline of a real hand, such as that recorded at Litcham (Norfolk) (Fig. 104). However, many of the others, like those found on the tower arch, were clearly too small or stylised to have been traced around a real hand. Such a strongly identifiable concentration of imagery is unusual. It may simply be the result of the unusual survival of the medieval plaster surface, leaving visible at Troston what was once common elsewhere. However, Troston is already well known for the survival of medieval wall paintings in the nave. These too have been so well preserved because extensive areas of the medieval plaster surface have also survived on the nave walls, but close examination of the surface shows no signs of any other imagery inscribed into this plaster, in direct contrast to sites such as Swannington or the Prior's Chapel at Durham Cathedral. The suggestion, therefore, must be that the concentration of graffiti hand imagery was a deliberate act, and that the location within the porch was deemed significant.

THE TROSTON DEMON

One the south side of the eastern face of the chancel arch is one of the most unusual and striking pieces of graffiti to be found at Troston. Located approximately two metres above the present floor surface, and above the vast mass of graffiti that adorns this area, is the elegantly

carved head of a demon or devil (Fig. 105). Executed in profile, the head is shown with mouth gaping wide to reveal an array of sharp teeth and with its long tongue lolling out grotesquely. Across the whole image, and set within the confines of the head itself, is a large and deeply carved five-pointed star or pentangle. In close proximity to the demon's head are several short textual inscriptions, all now badly eroded, that appear most likely to have originally been personal names, in keeping with the other text inscriptions located in this area of the church. Whether these inscriptions were originally intended to relate to the demon's head is unclear. The demon's head is only lightly inscribed into the stonework, in contrast to the deeply etched pentangle, and the text inscriptions, whilst apparently respecting the space around the demon's head, show no particular affinity to either.

The location of the graffito demon on the eastern face of the chancel arch is particularly intriguing. To date all other graffiti surveys of East Anglian churches suggest that this area is one of the least likely within a church to contain significant graffiti inscriptions. It has been assumed that this scarcity is accounted for by the fact that the chancel was a far less public area of the church building, largely reserved for clerics and the parish elite. The fact that this area of Troston church has actually one of the densest concentrations of graffiti raises a number of questions both about access to this area and the nature of the graffiti located there. Many of the inscriptions located on the eastern face of the chancel arch are clearly devotional in nature, such as the kneeling figure with hands raised in prayer. However, just as many are clearly more general and have no obvious devotional element. It is therefore difficult to argue that the placement of graffiti inscriptions in this area, an area of the church that was regarded as being more of a sacred nature than the nave, was an attempt to imbue the inscriptions with additional potency by virtue of their location.

In the case of the demon's head however, the positioning may well have been a deliberate reaction to the location itself. High above the western face of the chancel arch was located an extensive Doom painting of which only fragments now survive. From these few fragments it would appear that the painting was of fairly typical East Anglian style, with a central figure of Christ judging the souls of the parish departed.²⁸ On Christ's right hand the souls of the righteous were shown rising from the grave, hands pressed together in prayer as they were elevated towards heaven. In contrast, those figures depicted on the left hand of Christ were shown being judged, found wanting, and cast down into the pit of Hell accompanied by devils and demons. It is on the rear of this section of the chancel arch that the graffito inscription of the demon's head is located.

The position of the pentangle, enclosed within the head of the demon, would also appear to be significant. Despite its more modern negative connotations, the pentangle has a long history as a Christian symbol.²⁹ Thought to represent the five wounds of Christ, the pentangle was, according to the fourteenth-century poem 'Gawain and the Green Knight', the heraldic device of Sir Gawain – the Christian hero who personified both loyalty and chivalry.³⁰ The poem describes the symbolism of the pentangle in great detail, taking forty-six lines to do so. The symbol is, according to the anonymous author of the Gawain poem, a 'sign by Solomon', or endless knot, and was the symbol engraved upon the ring given to King Solomon by the archangel Michael. The ring and the seal upon it reputedly gave Solomon power over demons.³¹ This association between the pentangle and protection, or power over demons, would appear to be supported by many of the instances of graffiti pentangles. Although the symbol is a relative rarity in the surveys undertaken to date, except where it is used as a distinct mason's mark, such as at Lanercost Priory in Cumbria and Field Dalling church in Norfolk, examples have been identified in a number of East Anglian churches. Intriguingly, in a large number of these cases the pentangle is to be found in close proximity to either human or diabolical images of heads or full-length figures.³² In the case of diabolical images such as

the Troston Demon, the pentangle is to be found inscribed on top of the image, whilst the more human figures are shown with the pentangle most often inscribed either before or behind the figure, such as the early fifteenth-century lady with a headdress on the tower arch at Troston and several depictions of apparently female heads at Swannington.

Although fewer than twenty such inscriptions have so far been identified, the relative scarcity of human/diabolical figures and pentangles would suggest that the correlation between the two is deliberate. If this is the case then it would appear to be a significant relationship and suggest that, drawing upon the tradition of Solomon's ring, the pentangle was being used by the creators of the graffiti as a symbol of protection; in particular as protection from demons. In addition, the siting of the pentangle in relation to the human/diabolical figures may well indicate a further level of subtlety in protection sought by the author. The placing of the pentangle on top of the demon's head would appear to be a deliberate act of laying the protection across the image of the thing that the author feared – acting, in effect, as a trap for the demon. Likewise, the placing of the pentangle alongside the more human figures would suggest that these images themselves were not the object of fear, but were instead the objects that the symbol sought to garner protection for. Although such conclusions may be based upon a very limited number of examples so far discovered, it must be noted that the level of correlation between the two graffiti types is high, suggesting that the relationship was, at the very least, highly significant to the author of the inscription.

HERALDIC

Heraldic graffiti, in the form of coats of arms, helmet crests and livery symbols, represent one of the very few types of pre-Reformation graffiti for which we have any contemporary written references. According to William Wey, pilgrims of noble birth travelling to the Holy Land were read regulations upon their arrival that expressly forbade them from carving their coats of arms into the fabric of the Holy Sepulchre.³³ The fact that such acts had to be legislated against clearly implies that it was not an uncommon practice. Indeed, visitors today to the ancient convent of St Catherine in the Sinai can still view the many hundreds of coats of arms inscribed into the building, including the actual church door, by visiting medieval knights and their retinues.³⁴ In England heraldic graffiti are a relatively common find inscribed into parish churches, with the most common type being various forms of shields or coats of arms. Like those inscribed at St Catherine's monastery, it has been assumed that these English examples are no more than simple memorial inscriptions, created to commemorate a visit or symbolise some form of territorial ownership of the sacred space. It is also intriguing to note that, amongst all categories of graffiti recorded in English churches, it is invariably the heraldic graffiti that will suffer from defacement. Whilst surrounding clearly devotional graffiti



FIG. 106 – Chancel arch, south side. An excellent example of heraldic graffiti neatly incised into the stonework.

will remain untouched and respected, the heraldic graffiti, by their very nature associated with individuals, will be clearly and in many cases enthusiastically defaced.

A particularly fine example of heraldic graffiti was recorded as being located on the south-eastern face of the chancel arch at Troston (Fig. 106). Although clearly depicting a coat of arms, and having suffered no defacement, it has been impossible to associate the arms with any particular family. With heraldry being strongly reliant upon the use of colour to differentiate one set of arms from another, the lack of any pigment on the inscription, even when viewed under ultraviolet light, has made any specific identification unlikely. Located just above this extremely fine example of heraldic graffiti is another inscription that is also clearly meant to be a shield form. However, this second inscription is crude in the extreme and contains no details, and it is tempting to conclude that this shield was simply a doodle taking the form of the finer lower inscription.

On the opposite side of the chancel arch was identified another common example of heraldic graffiti, in the form of a poorly executed, but clearly identifiable, 'ragged staff' symbol (Fig. 107). The ragged staff is usually interpreted as being a simplified derivation of the bear and ragged staff, a symbol long associated with the earls of Warwick and, throughout the later Middle Ages, commonly used as the family's livery badge.³⁵ However, such a straightforward association may well be too simplistic an interpretation. Examples of similar ragged staff designs have been recorded in numerous East Anglian churches, including Norwich Cathedral (Norfolk), St Peter Hungate (Norfolk), Little Brickhill (Bucks) and Anstey (Herts). Indeed, as Violet Pritchard states, 'the ragged staff is found in nearly every church where there are graffiti'.³⁶ Whilst such quantities of graffiti may well be argued to be the result of the popularity of the earls of Warwick in the region it is notable that the livery symbols of other notable regional nobles, such as the dukes of Norfolk and the earls of Oxford, who possessed far greater land holdings and commanded as much, if not more, respect in East Anglia are absent. In addition, the location of these ragged staff symbols, in clearly religiously significant settings and in close proximity to recognised apotropaic symbols, would suggest that the symbols themselves held a religious significance for those who created them.

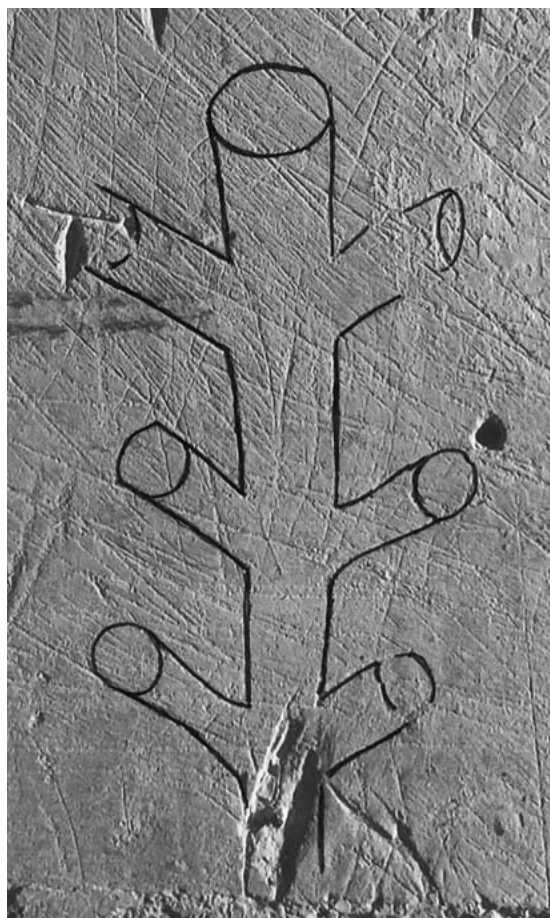


FIG. 107 – Chancel arch, north side.
The 'ragged staff'.

SHIPS

The badly eroded remains of two examples of ship graffiti were identified on the south side of the tower arch. Although these images are in an area where so many graffiti have been applied to the surface that the whole has become a mass of somewhat confused inscribed lines, there is enough detail present to clearly identify the inscriptions as depictions of large sailing

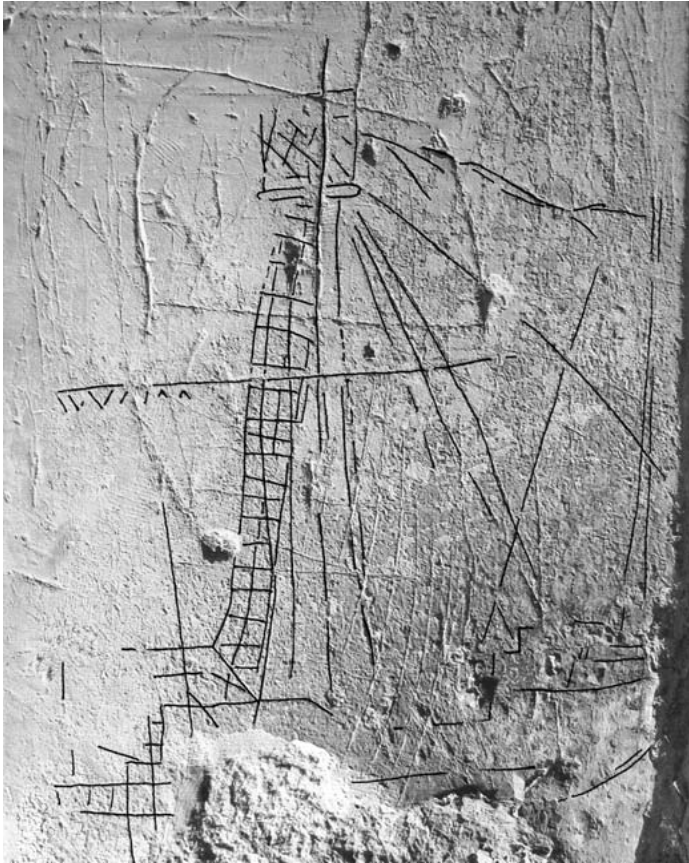


FIG. 108 – The better preserved of the two ship graffiti.

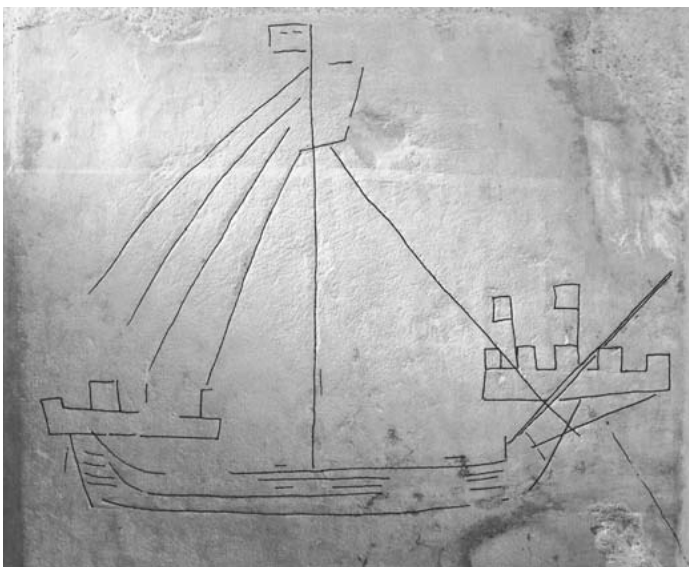


FIG. 109 – A very fine example of medieval ship graffiti from Cley-next-the-Sea, Norfolk. Unusually, this inscription shows enough detail to tentatively identify the ship as a ‘cog’, a type that would have been commonly used for trade in the North Sea.

ships. Masts, rigging and hull lines can still be made out, albeit in too little detail to attempt to ascribe vessel type or design. Both vessels are single-masted with a raised stern and bow section. The better preserved example also appears to show a cross-yard with evidence of a furling sail and a ‘crow’s nest’ or ‘mast-head’ (Fig. 108). The presence of such a feature would indicate that the vessel depicted is meant to represent a sea-going ship rather than local river traffic. In addition, the raised bow and stern sections, coupled with the single central mast, would tentatively suggest a fifteenth or early sixteenth century date.

Ship graffiti have long been regarded as a very distinct sub-type of graffiti found within religious and secular structures. Although concentrations of such graffiti images are often to be found in coastal areas, such as those recorded in the churches of Blakeney, Wiveton and Cley, Norfolk, and St Thomas’ church, Winchelsea, East Sussex, they are by no means confined to the coast (Fig. 109).³⁷ Examples are known in England from as far inland as Bedfordshire and Leicestershire, and the phenomenon has been recorded as far afield as the West Indies and the Lebanon.³⁸ Early medieval examples have been recorded in many countries, most notably Scandinavia and Ireland, and later medieval and post-medieval examples are to be found throughout England and the Continent.³⁹

The exact meaning of ship graffiti remain unclear, although it has been linked to the phenomenon of votive ships that were once found in many churches.⁴⁰ What is clear is that many examples of ship graffiti were designed to have both function and meaning. The mass inscriptions of ships, and their clear patterns of distribution, found in both St Nicholas church,

Blakeney, and St Thomas' church, Winchelsea, attest to the fact that these images were far more than simply idle sketches. Their concentrations around areas of heightened religious significance suggest that, like the many hundreds of votive ships still found in the churches of Demark, they functioned as some form of ex-voto offering. Whilst the position of the two Troston examples on the tower arch would not immediately suggest their being located in a religiously significant area of the church, and it may simply be a case of like attracting like, the fact that ship graffiti are found within the church at all must be regarded as significant.

POST-REFORMATION GRAFFITI

The most obvious examples of graffiti in the church date from the seventeenth century and they are so deeply scored into the stonework as to be unmissable. All the identifiable and datable examples are located on the tower arch. The most prominent of these, deeply carved into the south side of the arch, are a series of dates from the middle of the seventeenth century. Beginning in 1643, the series of dates continues uninterrupted until 1650 (Fig. 110). The dates are not apparently associated with any other imagery and their meaning and significance are unclear. However, the actual dates themselves correspond to the period of social and religious upheaval surrounding the period of the English Civil War. The association of graffiti inscriptions with times of conflict and social pressure is already a recognised phenomenon. In particular, graffiti studies have highlighted certain chronological 'hot spots' that are more likely to result in the creation of church graffiti than others. The most obvious of these are periods of social disjuncture such as the Black Death, the mid sixteenth-century religious reformation, the Civil Wars and the First and Second World Wars. Indeed, the quantity of Second World War graffiti in East Anglian churches is worthy of note in its own right. The assumption is that at times of social stress and dislocation, particularly at times when the threat of imminent death is heightened, individuals feel the need to write upon the walls, perhaps as a form of memorialisation. Although it is impossible to positively ascribe such motivations to the creator of the series of dates found in Troston church, the dates themselves would suggest that it must be considered a possibility.

The other most notable examples of post-Reformation graffiti are also found on the south side of the tower arch (Fig. 111). Although far less heavily incised than the series of dates, three structures were identified that were clearly meant to represent buildings. Two of the inscriptions had been previously recorded, with a third, less heavily incised, example being identified during the survey work. All three contain inscribed dates, 1597, 1698 and 1699 respectively, and the initials 'TC' or 'TG'. According to



FIG. 110 – Tower arch, south side. Deeply inscribed series of dates from the period of the English Civil War. Very few such graffiti predate the late 16th century.

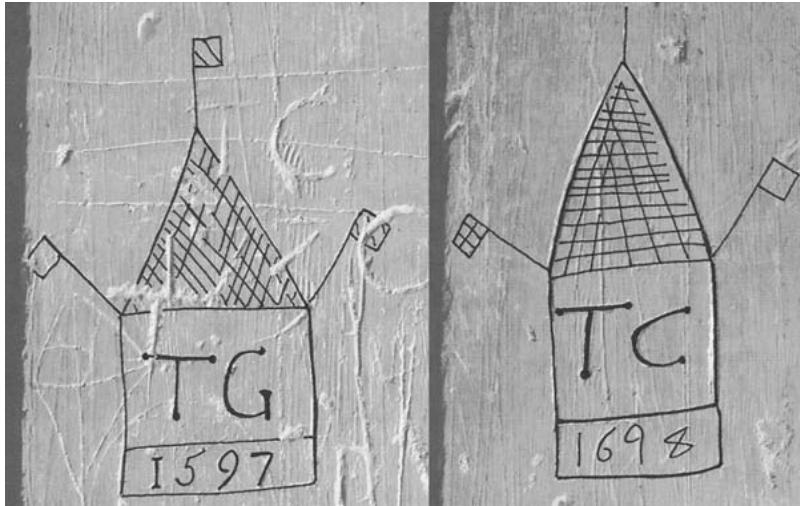


FIG. 111 – Tower arch, south side. These graffiti appear to show individual buildings decorated with flags or banners – created over a century apart.

structures is actually meant to depict a windmill. All three show a steeply pitched roof above a narrow building, with projections on either side angling upwards. However, these projections, thought originally to be the sails of the mill, appear to depict some form of



FIG. 112 – Norwich Cathedral. A very similar graffiti of a building, with a steep pitched roof that appears to be decorated with banners of flags.

local tradition, the two previously known inscriptions depict a now long-since demolished windmill that was located nearby. Such graffiti of windmills are relatively common finds. Dalham St Mary, Suffolk, contains two similar depictions also located on the tower arch, and similar examples are to be found at King's Walden (Hertfordshire), Grantchester (Cambridgeshire), and Lidgate (Suffolk).⁴¹ However, closer inspection of the three inscribed images at Troston would suggest that none of the

flagpole or staff, and no matching projections are shown lower down on the structures as they would if the artist were depicting the sails of a windmill. Several stylistic and chronologically similar designs have also been recorded in Norwich Cathedral and elsewhere, where they too bear seventeenth century dates and initials (Fig. 112). Certain of the Norwich Cathedral examples are slightly more complex than those from Troston, with a central flag shown raised above the roofline, in addition to those projecting from the sides. However, having concluded that the structures are not meant to show windmills, it remains unclear what they are actually meant to be depicting. Whilst noting their stylistic similarity to continental wayside shrines, and medieval depictions of the Stations of the Cross, their clearly post-medieval date makes such definite associations highly improbable.

OTHER NOTABLE GRAFFITI

There are several other graffiti inscriptions in Troston church that are worthy of individual note but, due to their nature or

location, defy any attempt at accurate dating. Both the chancel arch and tower arch are a mass of intertwined inscriptions, making the recording of individual elements particularly difficult. Whilst a number of seemingly decorative patterns and crosses are located on the chancel arch, the tower arch appears to hold a number of inscriptions of fish, birds and animals, including at least two depictions of deer already noted (Fig. 113). Also on the tower arch are a number of small faces and heads shown in profile, many of which are overlaid by text inscriptions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Likewise, the plaster of the porch and the stone door surrounds also contain further later inscriptions, including one that appears to depict a gibbet (Fig. 114).



FIG. 113 – Tower arch, north side. Neatly inscribed example of a fish apparently created as a stand-alone example. Although the fish may be regarded as a Christian symbol, and often appears in depictions of St Christopher, the frequency with which they are recorded as graffiti is notable – and unexplained.

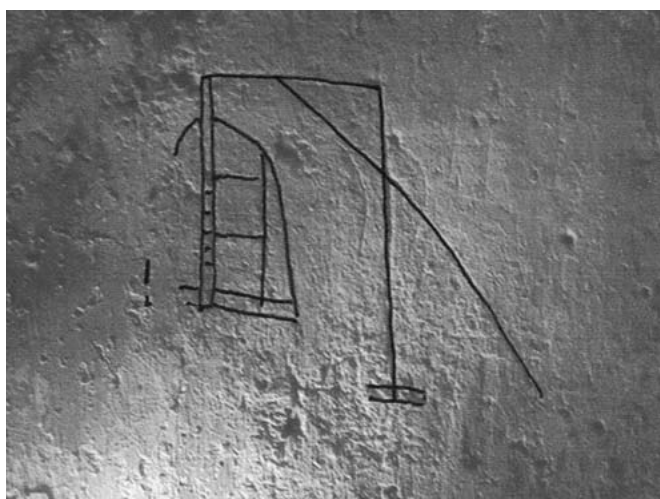


FIG. 114 – Porch, south wall. An apparent depiction of a gibbet near the south doorway. Of uncertain date, but the surrounding area contains inscriptions dating from the 17th and 18th centuries.

CONCLUSIONS

The sheer quantity of graffiti identified at Troston is worthy of note and may well be the result of the use of relatively soft building material for both the majority of the tower and chancel arches. All Saints church, Litcham, Norfolk, has also been identified as containing an unusually large number of graffiti inscriptions and the similarity between the materials used in the two churches is marked. However, whilst it is tempting to suggest that churches constructed of softer building materials, such as Troston, Parham, Lidgate and Litcham, are more likely to attract large numbers of graffiti inscriptions, it must be noted that at

churches such as Wiveton, Blakeney, Swannington and Marsham that contain a far greater concentration of material, no such softer construction material was utilised. It must, therefore, be concluded that, whilst a softer building material may facilitate the creation of graffiti inscriptions, it is by no means the sole factor in either their creation or concentration.

There are so many inscriptions at Troston that many of the surfaces are now so covered as to make clear interpretation of separate elements all but impossible. Whilst the survey did clearly identify more than two hundred inscriptions, certain areas, most notably the eastern face of the chancel arch, probably originally contained several hundred more individual markings that are today only visible as a jumbled mass of lines and curves. Of the inscriptions that were identifiable it is clear that a large number were devotional in nature. Although there

are elements, particularly amongst the textual inscriptions, that may well be simply memorial or territorial in nature, these are in the minority. The fact that the vast majority of these inscriptions would have originally been far easier to see than today, being cut through pigment to reveal the pale stone beneath, coupled with the fact that few individual inscriptions appear to have been deliberately defaced, would suggest that the creation of these markings was both an accepted and acceptable part of worship within the medieval parish.

Whilst the content and quantity of inscriptions recorded at Troston clearly suggest that the inscriptions formed a locally legitimised aspect of lay piety within the parish, the extent of this legitimation is unclear. Inscriptions appear to have been created by literate individuals of high social standing and, it may be strongly suggested, by the illiterate lower orders as well. That it was a devotional activity is clear from the subject matter of many of the inscriptions. However, whilst the practice may have received a pragmatic acceptance at a local level, it lay outside the formal doctrine of the medieval church. Thus, the graffiti inscriptions at St Mary's, in common with inscriptions recorded in other English churches, raise far more questions than they answer.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the congregation, churchwardens and rector of St Mary's church for allowing me to fill their church with lights, cameras and graffiti hunters on many occasions, and without complaint. I am also grateful to Sue Sollohub and the members of the Troston Heritage Group for their tireless support and promotion of the church and the many wonders it contains, including the newly discovered graffiti inscriptions. I am particularly grateful to Richard Neville, coordinator of the Surrey Medieval Graffiti Survey, for joining me in surveying the church, and to Timothy Easton, John Peake, Colin Howey, Paul Judkins and Pat May for their unstinting help and advice with regards to the graffiti survey. Thanks are also due to Roger Rosewell and Andrea Kirkham for their help and advice with regard to the original plaster surfaces and the wall paintings in the church.

NOTES

- 1 Rosewell 2008, 24–26.
- 2 <http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk>; <http://www.medieval-graffiti-suffolk.co.uk>
- 3 Only one full length work has been published on the subject (Pritchard 1967) and this was recently reissued entirely unaltered. More recently the subject has come under closer scrutiny by scholars such as Timothy Easton, who has conducted a number of groundbreaking studies upon the ritual markings recorded in post-Reformation vernacular buildings (Easton 1998). Easton's work on vernacular buildings has been supplemented by useful studies such as Meeson 2005. With the notable exception of Gardiner 2007, the study of church graffiti from the pre-Reformation period has been confined largely to site- or type-specific surveys.
- 4 Although parish registers do not generally begin until the middle decades of the sixteenth century, details of individual marriages, deaths and land tenancy can be found amongst many surviving medieval manor court rolls, churchwardens' accounts and wills.
- 5 Kirkham, Paine and Heywood 2010, 385–91; Paine 2011, 11.
- 6 Champion 2011, 199–208.
- 7 Graves and Rollason 2010, 25–43.
- 8 Duffy 2012, 60–63.
- 9 Peake 2012, 148–62.
- 10 Stylistic dating for many graffiti inscriptions is entirely reliant upon comparisons with similar contemporary depictions, most notably those from manuscript illustrations, funerary brasses, wall paintings and pilgrim souvenirs.
- 11 Pritchard 1967, 181–83.
- 12 Northeast 2001, 355, 244; Northeast and Falvey 2010, 438.

- 13 The example from All Saints, Litcham, has been tentatively ascribed to the second half of the fifteenth century: Champion 2011, 199–208.
- 14 Pritchard 1967, 25; Meeson 2005, 45–46.
- 15 Compass-drawn circles, and daisy wheels in particular, continued to be inscribed in many post-Reformation vernacular buildings. In this context they are generally accepted as being apotropaic in nature: Easton 1999, 23.
- 16 Atkinson 1906, 255–62.
- 17 Rosewell 2008, 131.
- 18 Erlande-Brandenburg 1995, 74–75.
- 19 Easton 1998, 533–34.
- 20 Tyack 1899, 154–177.
- 21 Stabb 1909, 22, 31.
- 22 Schechter 2000, 24; Girling 1962, 103–26.
- 23 All masons' marks identified by the NMGS are routinely passed to Dr Jenny Alexander, University of Warwick, for inclusion in her expanding database of UK pre-Reformation masons' marks.
- 24 Champion 2012, 114–16.
- 25 Sumption 2002, 157.
- 26 Duffy 1992, 197.
- 27 Gilchrist 2012, 94.
- 28 Kirkham, Paine and Heywood 2010, 385–91.
- 29 Child and Colles 1971, 136–37.
- 30 Only a single manuscript of the original fourteenth-century poem exists: British Library, *Cotton MS Nero A.x.*, fols 41r–130r.
- 31 LaBossière and Gladson 1992, 722.
- 32 I am indebted to Becky Williams, formerly of the University of Liverpool, for sharing her observations on the significance of the distribution patterns associated with pentagram inscriptions.
- 33 Mitchell 1965, 94.
- 34 Forsyth and Weitzmann 1973, plate XLVIIa.
- 35 A number of cast pewter examples of these badges, which would have been handed out to followers and retainers, have been discovered in East Anglia: Spencer 2010, 293.
- 36 Pritchard 1967, 22.
- 37 Champion 2012, 113–15.
- 38 Turner 2004, iii–iv.
- 39 Brady and Corlett 2004, 28–31.
- 40 Harley 1994, 16–30.
- 41 Pritchard 1967, 138–49.

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