

## SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

### A GRAFFITO OF A NOTARIAL SIGN IN HOXNE CHURCH

by Bari Hooper

The purpose of this note is to draw attention to a rare graffito in the form of a double-heart-shaped endless knot scratched on the north-east respond in the nave of the church of SS Peter and Paul, Hoxne. The graffito (Fig. 74A), was originally published by the late Violet Pritchard, who confidently describes it as a design 'peculiar to Saxon art' (Pritchard 1967, 137). The origins of interlace art work are as complicated as its patterns, and this note is not the place to discuss its history; let it suffice to say that the Hoxne graffito is incised in an arcade which was constructed c. 1400 (Haward 1993, 457), and as will be shown below, its perpetrator exercised his skill with a stylus not, as Mrs Pritchard suggests, to illustrate a piece of Saxon ecclesiastical ornament formerly in the church (Pritchard 1967, 140), but literally to make his mark upon the stone.

Having failed to recognise what the drawing actually depicts, Mrs Pritchard suggests that it might represent a reliquary or a pyx, to which she adds, 'the history of Hoxne and its church goes back authentically to Saxon times, [which fact] may be instrumental in attempting to date the ornament' (Pritchard 1967, 137). There follows a discourse on the life of the martyr king Saint Edmund, who, she reminds us, was according to tradition murdered and buried at Hoxne. This tradition, however, originated only in the 12th century, and Dr S.E. West has argued convincingly for Bradfield St Clare as the site of the martyrdom (West 1983, 223–25). Lest this hagiographical diversion in support of the supposed Saxon origin of the graffito be considered too dependent upon legend, Mrs Pritchard, determined to pursue her Saxon hypothesis, goes on to say that 'there is a great deal of evidence to prove that a large area round [sic] Hoxne was an important Saxon settlement'. It is at this point that, having set the scene of pre-Conquest activity around the parish, she ventures the suggestion that a Saxon ornament or vessel may have been in use in the church (with the clear implication that the graffito is a sketch of it), and asks, 'if it were, did it escape the rapaciousness of William I, and did it remain at Hoxne until the Dissolution of the Monasteries?' (Pritchard 1967, 140). The irrefutable fact of a Saxon presence in the area (and in much of the rest of Suffolk) is however quite irrelevant, for what this graffito actually depicts is not a Saxon ornament but a medieval notarial sign, a mark of attestation penned by a public notary upon all the legal documents he drafted.

The office of Notary Public is of considerable antiquity, its pedigree being traceable directly back to Imperial Rome. From 1320 until the Reformation notaries were appointees of the Pope, the Emperor, or both, describing themselves as acting *auctoritate apostolica (sacra Romana)*, or *auctoritate imperiali (sacra Romana)*, or both. After 1534 they were appointed in England through the Archbishop of Canterbury, from which time they styled themselves as acting *auctoritate regia* (Purvis 1957, iii).

The medieval notary specialized in Roman or Canon Law and his tasks included the preparation, writing and witnessing of deeds of title, conveyances and other documents. To authenticate each document he prepared, the notary appended his individual notarial sign (and sometimes a *paraph*, an additional mark in the form of a flourish). Notarial signs were ordinarily based upon a cross, but many were designed upon the basis of a trefoil, hexafoil, octofoil or some form of interlaced pattern. Whatever design was chosen, almost all were depicted as though standing upon a base in the manner of a medieval monstrance. A close examination of the parchment upon which the notarial signs were drawn shows evidence that some of the more complicated designs were first outlined with a stylus or marked with a dry stamp before being inked in.

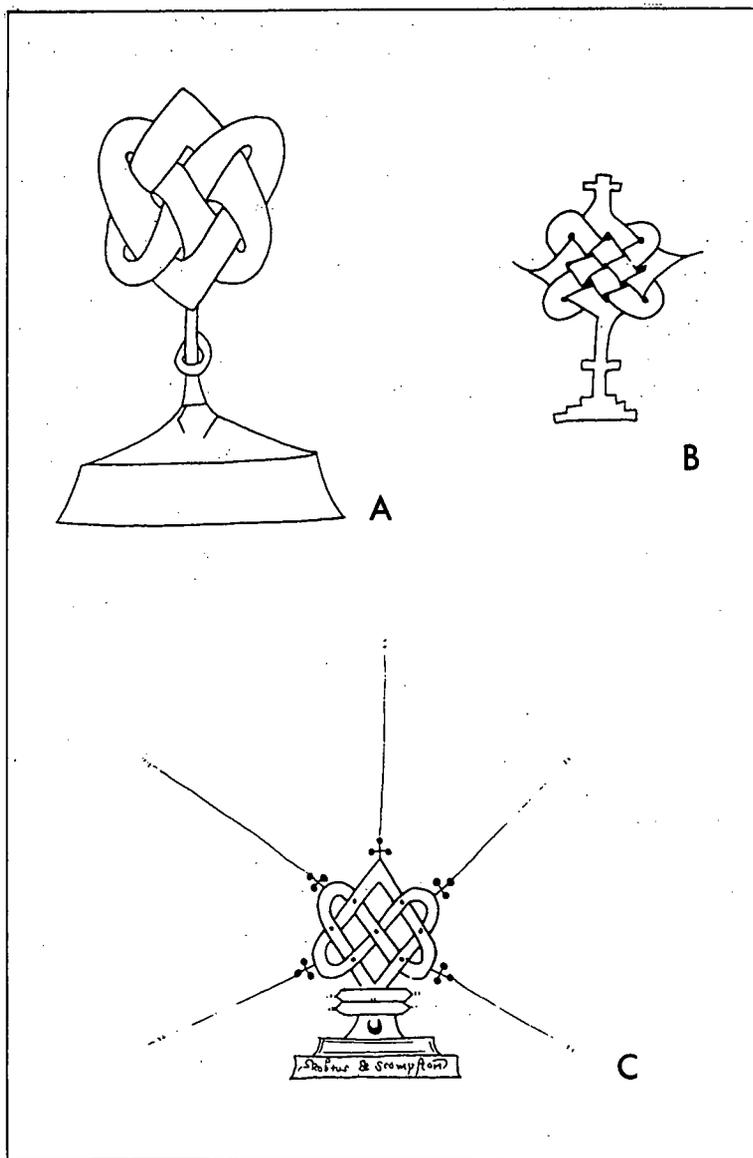


FIG. 74 – (A) Notarial sign in Hoxne Church; (B) and (C) Notarial signs of John de Norton (1323) and Robert de Scampston (1379) respectively, both in the York archiepiscopal records.

Many notaries combined their profession with that of scrivener, and by virtue of this, some of their signs are preserved in the Common Paper of the Scriveners' Company, a register listing membership from the mid-14th century though to 1628 (Freshfield 1895, 239–54). Another fine collection of notarial signs is to be found in the York diocesan records, a selection of which, covering the period from the 13th to the 18th century, was published by Canon J.S. Purvis (1957).

Some of the signs in this last collection, two of which are depicted here for comparison (Fig. 74 B, C) show observable similarities to the Hoxne graffito. The sign in Fig. 74C has the signature of the notary Robert de Scampston (1379) written upon its base. A very faint scratching on the base of the Hoxne sign may also indicate a signature, but unfortunately it is too indistinct to be decipherable.

One Suffolk notary whose mark has been recorded for posterity is that of Robert Wimbill (d.1479) of Ipswich, who was elected Bailiff of the Corporation in 1469–70. His brass memorial effigy in the church of St Mary le Tower, Ipswich, shows him with his penner and ink bottle suspended from his girdle. The brass has unfortunately been robbed of its inscription and surrounding components, but a sketch made c.1740 depicts his notarial sign, which was apparently displayed several times on the memorial (Blatchly and Northeast 1989, 257–60).

During the 17th century a marked deterioration in the design and execution of the notarial sign set in, and some notaries about this time abandoned its use altogether. By the 18th century many of the notaries still attesting documents in this fashion had substituted impressed or stamped examples for their hand-drawn signs. The Hoxne notarial sign is well drawn and typical of the interlaced variety seen in documents drafted from the 14th to the 16th century. There is no evidence at the moment to attribute it to any particular Suffolk notary or scrivener, but researchers engaged in examining medieval ecclesiastical and legal records of the county would do well to look for its counterpart. Such a discovery might well furnish both the name of the notary and his period of employment.

#### *References*

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