Why Graffiti

The presence of medieval graffiti within English medieval parish churches has been known and recorded since at least the nineteenth century. Little work has been undertaken in recent decades, however, and it has largely been overlooked by scholars of ecclesiastical architecture and church archaeology.

Recently, graffiti as a topic has seen a resurgence in academic interest and recoding the graffiti present in churches has become a focus of several projects. Perhaps the most comprehensive has been that in Norfolk, established in 2010 (see http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk/), with other surveys now taking place across the country.

The study of graffiti allows an appreciation of the “unofficial voices” of the medieval (and later) periods and an understanding of belief and social systems which are not available by other methods (see Matthew Champion’s Medieval Graffiti. The lost voices of England’s Churches for an in-depth discussion).

Before You Start

The guidance in this handbook is largely based on that of the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Project and represent the minimum level of information required to undertake a successful survey.

Choosing your site

The aim of the survey is to cover all of the churches in Worcestershire with surviving medieval fabric. A list of these is available on the Worcestershire Historic Graffiti Project website, which will be updated as churches are surveyed (see https://worcestershiremedievalgraffiti.wordpress.com/). We are also seeking permission to survey selected upstanding medieval dwellings.

Preparation

Before carrying out a graffiti survey it is useful to undertake some research on your chosen site. Pevsner’s Buildings of England is a useful resource, and many church plans are present on the Victoria County History website (see http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/worcs/vol3).

Not all churches are open, so it can be useful to find the details of the church warden or key holder. These details can usually be found on the internet via www.achurchnearyou.com.

Equipment

The minimum level of equipment to carry out a survey includes:

- a light source such as a torch or lamp
- digital camera
- photometric scale
- survey sheet and photo record sheet
- tape measure
- pen/pencil
- spare batteries for the camera and torch.

Lighting

To identify existing graffiti it is usually necessary to shine a light source at an oblique angle across the surface of the wall or pier (raking light). This will usually be sufficient to spot even the shallowest of inscriptions. There are no set rules or guidelines about the light source that you use and it is worth experimenting: the very white light emitted by LED torches often works well on bare stone surfaces, whilst larger halogen lamps are found to be useful on rougher textured surfaces.

Photographs

The survey will use digital cameras to record graffiti, but taking photographs of graffiti inscriptions can be challenging and it is worth experimenting with a variety of light sources and angles to obtain the best
results. If the images have too much light they can often look bleached and difficult to interpret. Too little light, or not enough contrast, can be just as frustrating.

Again, there are no rules about the specification of equipment, with a simple ‘point and click’ camera often giving as good results as many thousands of pounds worth of camera equipment. The key is to gain a clear, detailed picture of the image that you are recording. For some sites a digital SLR on a tripod may be required to record images which are difficult to spot in dark areas of the building.

Please do not be tempted to “enhance” any graffiti you may encounter by tracing, rubbing or using chalk to outline it: all of these techniques may damage images. If graffiti is unclear, it may be possible to use photo-enhancement software such as Photoshop to clarify images.

Scales

It is essential that you try and include a scale in any photographs that you take of graffiti inscriptions. We recommend a “credit card” archaelogical scale, which is available from Past Horizons, but any scale in centimetres will do. Take at least one image with a scale, but no scale is required for detailed photography.

Please be sensitive to the surface of the stonework: if it is friable, or contains remnants of limewash or paintings, please do NOT try to stick the scale to it, simply hold the scale in place.

Recording Sheets

Two recording sheets need to be filled in for each church. Templates are available on the project website. These are designed to be easy to complete and represent the very minimum of information required to undertake a successful survey. Please do not hesitate to include any further information that you feel might be either useful or relevant.

Undertaking a Survey

Where to go?

A list of medieval churches is available on the project website. We aim to survey all of these during the course of the project, although not all of them may contain graffiti.

The stone utilised in the construction of churches in the county is variable and exterior surfaces can often be badly eroded. Many dressed stone details may also have been replaced and restored. This is also true of the interior, where it may be possible to see the re-facing of medieval masonry. In many cases the Victorian restorations of church interiors went as far as stripping back the layers of lime-wash, removing wall paintings and, in extreme cases, the removal of the internal plaster surface to expose the bare stonework beneath. Churches with heavy restoration will, therefore, be likely to contain less graffiti.

Where to look?

It is important to be systematic in your search for graffiti. Start with the outside of the church and look on all of the stone surfaces. Sunlight may make this difficult and it may be necessary to make a number of visits at different times of day or under different lighting conditions (cloudy, sunny etc). Look out for mass dials on the southern side of the church and be careful to look around window and door openings, as well as on any dressed stone surfaces.

It is, again, important to be systematic on the inside of the church. Although certain areas on the interior tend to attract graffiti, be sure to check all of the exposed stonework. Likely areas include the arcade piers, particularly if their surfaces are faceted rather than round; around doorways, particularly the south door and, if present, the tower stair; the tower arch, chancel arch and the font. However, any relatively flat and plain area of stonework may well have attracted graffiti over the centuries and no area should be entirely ruled out. The inscriptions are often located at eye level, where they can be quite obvious, or lower down on the stonework, suggesting that they may have been created by someone kneeling down.

Graffiti inscriptions can vary widely in terms of size. Whilst inscribed names and decorative patterns tend to be quite small and discrete, others may well represent life sized depictions of faces, hands and feet. It is therefore important not to dismiss engraved lines or curves that appear random and have no immediate
obvious meaning. It may well be that they belong to an inscription that it is impossible to correctly identify due to either its scale or state of preservation.

What you might find

The simple answer is just about anything - and many examples are included in this handbook. However, any study of church graffiti will always throw up a number of symbols that, no matter where you are in the country, keep turning up. Certain types of graffiti, such as Ship graffiti or heraldic devices, turn up across the country. However, although dealing with the same subject matter, these images most often contain considerable variation. A ship in Norfolk will, in all likelihood, bear a passing resemblance to a ship in Cornwall, but it will not be identical. Likewise, heraldic devices found in one church will probably show significant differences from heraldic devices found elsewhere. At best they can be said to share the same subject matter.

Although not strictly classed as graffiti, so-called Mass Dials or scratch dials may be present on the south wall of churches, often in small groups. These are usually interpreted as basic sun dials, marked with the times of the main services of the day. Sometimes they are present on the interior of churches, however, and their interpretation is beginning to be questioned. A further semi-official mark is the mason’s mark, usually made as a way of securing payment for piece work. All of these symbols should be recorded in a survey.

However, there are a number of identical designs and symbols that, no matter where in the country you look, will be discovered. These symbols, of which there are three main varieties, will, in many cases, be exact matches. There may be slight variations upon the same theme, or more elaborate examples, but in all other respects they will be identical. You are as likely to find exactly the same symbol in a church in Yorkshire as you are a church in Kent. Examples of these repetitive symbols are shown below.

Completing a Survey

It can be useful to take a staged approach to surveying churches. An initial visit may be a quick survey to assess the presence or absence of graffiti. If graffiti is present, it may be necessary to return with improved lighting or camera equipment in order to better record the images or to pick out more subtle marks. The end result of any survey should be:

- completed survey sheet
- completed photographic record sheet
- digital images

All of these should be made available to the survey coordinators in order for them to be uploaded onto the project website and for the final project report to be written. The best email to use is d.mullin@worc.ac.uk

Things to remember

- Some graffiti inscriptions are difficult to interpret. What may appear as a meaningless jumble of lines during a survey may turn out to be something quite important. If in doubt - take a photograph.
- Some churches may contain very complex series of inscriptions that take far more than a single visit to record. Multiple visits are often very productive.
- We do not expect you to know everything. If in any doubt - please ask for help or advice.
- Please remember that churches are active places of worship. Please respect those who look after and care for these buildings.
- Please sign the visitors book. Many churches use visitor numbers to help in supporting future projects and finding funding. Every visitor is important.
- If you have to find a key-holder to access the church please remember to lock up when you leave - and return the key.
Photographic Examples

BAD - not enough contrast and light source at too oblique an angle. As a result details are far harder to make out.

BAD - light source held too near the subject has resulted in light reflecting off the stone surface.

GOOD - light source at the right angle to create good contrast and far enough away to avoid it reflecting off the surface.

A good photograph should have an almost 3D effect.
Swastika Pelta or Solomon’s Knot
This design has been discovered in numerous churches all over Europe. Although it is an ancient symbol, appearing upon Roman mosaics from as early as the 4th century, it appears to have been adopted as a Christian symbol. However, its exact meaning remains obscure.

VW symbol/Marian mark
This symbol turns up inscribed in both stone and wood - and is often found inversed. It has been associated with the Virgin Mary - but its symbolism still remains unclear. Often found incised into doorways.

Compass Drawn Designs
Probably the most common discovery made in any church, these compass drawn designs can take a multitude of forms - from a simple circle or cross design - to a complex six petalled rosette. Their exact meaning remains enigmatic.
Ship Graffiti

Although they are found in large numbers around the coast they have also been found as far inland as Leicestershire. Many are just very simple stylised ships - whilst others, like this example from Wiveton in Norfolk, can be very complex indeed.

From their location within churches many of these examples appear to be devotional in nature. However, whether they are thanks for a safe voyage undertaken, or a plea for safe passage in the future, remains obscure.

Below: a mass dial on the exterior of Earl’s Croome church
Mason’s Marks

Masons marks were inscribed on the stones of the church during construction by the stone-masons themselves. It is believed that they were used to indicate which mason had actually carried out which piece of work - and allowed them to be paid accordingly. One church may contain many different marks.