Medieval Graffiti Survey:

Volunteer Handbook

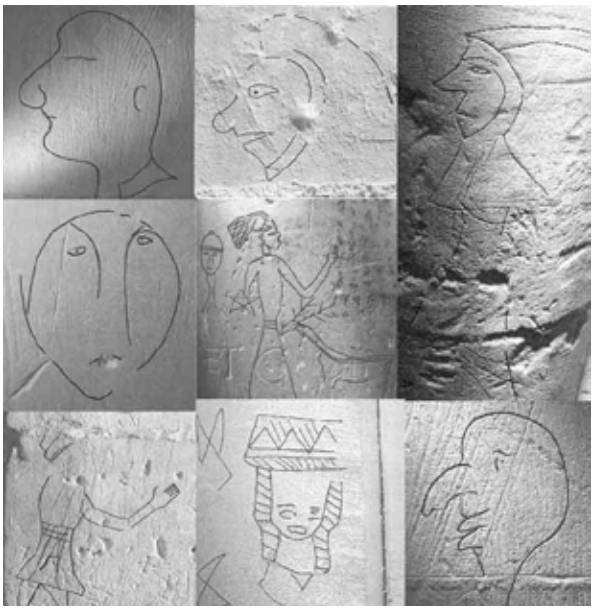
Revised Oct. 2017

1.0 Why Graffiti?

The study of medieval graffiti within parish churches has a long history within the study of archaeology. Some of the earliest articles to appear in dedicated archaeological journals deal specifically with individual site surveys, often undertaken by enthusiastic amateurs, during the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, since this period the subject has largely slipped into obscurity and little work has been undertaken in recent decades. The work that has been undertaken has largely been carried out as and when opportunities have arisen, or when specific examples have been brought to the attention of archaeologists and historians.

The study of medieval graffiti, though having a long pedigree, has largely been overlooked by modern scholars of the church. In part this is most probably the result of the difficulty in identifying the source material. Where written records have long been brought together in record offices and libraries, and stained glass gathered together in archives and reference volumes, medieval graffiti, by its very nature, remains a scattered and largely hidden resource. It's identification, even within a single church, can take many hours of survey work with specialist equipment and, even then, it often remains visible to the naked eye only for as long as it takes to record it under specialist lighting conditions.

However, such painstaking surveys can be highly rewarding, opening up previously unseen inscriptions and images that cast new light upon the day to day activities of the commonality within individual church buildings.



2.0 Before you begin

Before carrying out a church graffiti survey we recommend that you undertake some research upon your chosen site. A quick read through the church guidebook, or publications such as Pevsner's Buildings of England, will tell you a great deal that may be useful to you when carrying out a survey. Also check to see if the church has its own dedicated website.

This may contain a great deal of useful information about the history of the building, as well as containing information about service times, contact details and opening arrangements.

If you are planning on undertaking a full survey we recommend that you contact the churchwardens prior to your visit. Contact details, and lots of other useful information, can usually be found on the Church of England maintained website - A Church Near You

(https://www.achurchnearyou.com/)

3.0 Equipment

Although we have endeavoured to keep the survey requirements to a minimum there are a few pieces of equipment that you will not be able to do without.

Light Source: to locate and record existing graffiti it is necessary to shine a light across the surfaces to be examined. Although any light source will be effective to a given extent, some are better than others. We recommend the use of LED torches and spot-lights, as opposed to those lights using a traditional bulb. The very white and even light produced by the LEDs eliminates the lens effect produced by many traditional torches, and works particularly well on stone surfaces.

Camera: Just about any form of digital camera will be of sufficient resolution to undertake a church graffiti survey. However, it is important to ensure that the camera is set to record the image to maximum quality (many tablets and smartphone cameras are of good quality, but the software automatically down-sizes the resulting image - making them all but useless). If undertaking surveys alone you will also require a camera tripod, so that you can hold the scale in place whilst taking the photograph.

Scale: it is important that you use a photographic scale in ALL photographs, which is why it is often easier to undertake surveys in pairs, or a small group. We recommend the use of a credit-card sized scale. These easily fit in to a purse or wallet, meaning that you should never be without a scale. Do not attach the scale to the surface to be photographed.

Documentation: each completed survey will require a minimum of two very straightforward pieces of paperwork to be completed - the 'Survey Sheet' and he 'Photographic Record Sheet'. Both are available as free downloads via the project website. An example of a completed Survey Sheet is shown later in this handbook (Section 8.0). The Photographic Record Sheet is simply a list of the photographs taken during the survey - and should be submitted along with the photographs themselves. In the case of more complex surveys multiple photo record sheets are likely to be produced. Please submit all images and associated documentation (see '9.0 Submitting a completed survey').

4.0 Undertaking a survey

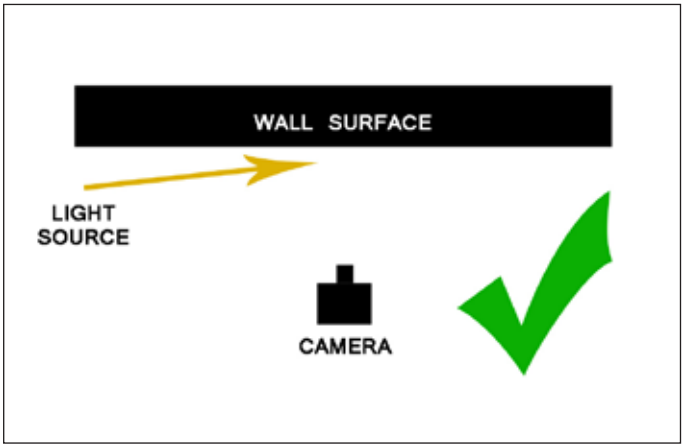
- Be systematic: choose a starting point a gradually work your way around the church in a thorough and systematic manner.
- Photograph everything: we are creating a base-line survey, and recording EVERYTHING present in the building, so this means recording even any relatively recent inscriptions you may come across.
- Check every surface: graffiti isn't confined to the stonework, so please remember to check ALL surfaces, including plaster, timber, lead and even the glass.
- Safety First: it is essential that all volunteers are aware that any old building can present a number of safety hazards. It is therefore essential that all volunteers limit their surveys to ground-floor areas, and keep their feet firmly on the ground.

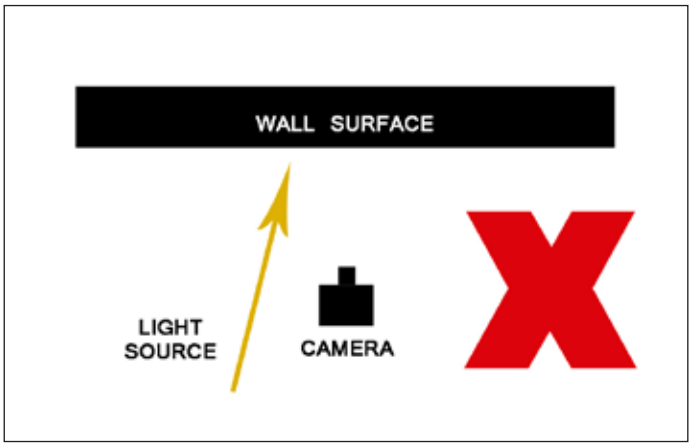
5.0 How to photograph graffiti

Taking photographs of graffiti inscriptions can be challenging. It is well 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. We recommend the use of digital cameras so that poor images may be easily deleted without cost. In addition, it is not essential to have an expensive professional level camera to take great photographs. A simple 'point and press' camera will often give as good results as many thousands of pounds worth of camera equipment.

5.1 Raking Light Surveys

Although there are a number of different techniques used to record graffiti inscriptions one of the simplest, quickest and most effective is the 'Raking Light' survey. This involves shinning the light obliquely ACROSS the surface to be recorded. NOT directly on to the surface. The more oblique the angle is the better the results will be.





6.0 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.
- Photograph EVERYTHING, even obviously modern inscriptions.
- Some churches may contain very complex series of inscriptions that take far more than a single visit to record. In addition, changing weather conditions can radically alter what you can see. Multiple visits are often very productive.
- We do not expect you to know everything, or get everything right the fist time. 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.

7.0 Photographic Examples

BAD - not enough contrast. Light source not at an oblique angle.

BAD - light source too close to the subject matter resulting in light reflecting off the stone surface - causing glare.

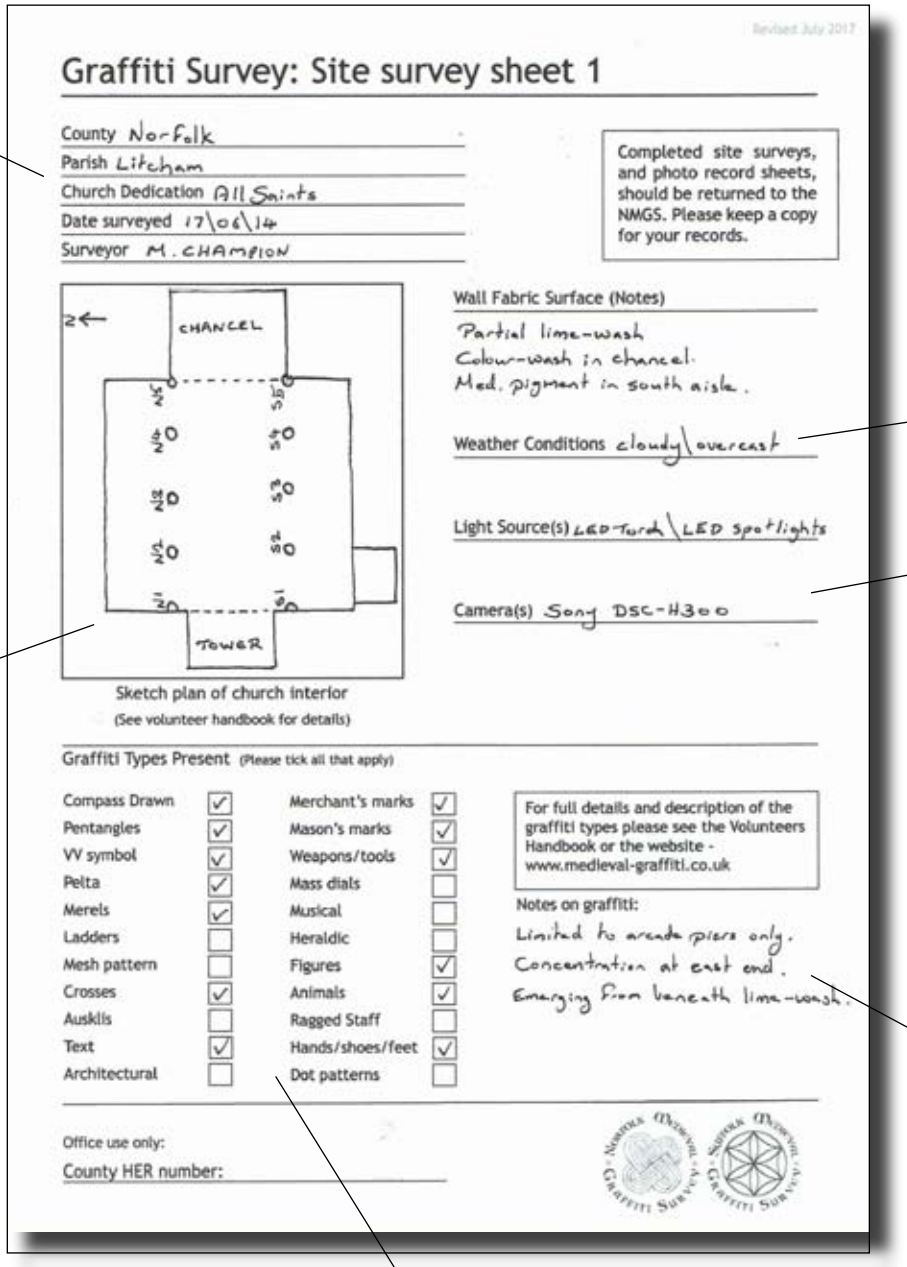
GOOD - light source at a highly oblique angle creating high levels of contrast, but far enough away from the subject matter to reduce the possibility of lens glare.

A good photograph should have an almost 3D effect.

8.0 Completed Survey Sheet - Notes

Site survey sheets and photo record sheets need to be filled out for every church examined - even if the church contains no obvious early inscriptions. All the forms can be freely downloaded from the website.

Please note all the basic location details for the church. If you are unsure of the dedication details will be found on the 'A Church Near You' website (see Additional Resources)



Revised July 2017

Graffiti Survey: Site survey sheet 1

County Norfolk
Parish Litcham
Church Dedication All Saints
Date surveyed 17\06\14
Surveyor M. CHAMPION

Completed site surveys, and photo record sheets, should be returned to the NMGS. Please keep a copy for your records.

Sketch plan of church interior
(See volunteer handbook for details)

Wall Fabric Surface (Notes)
Partial lime-wash
Colour-wash in chancel.
Med. pigment in south aisle.

Weather Conditions cloudy\overcast

Light Source(s) LED-torch\LED spotlights

Camera(s) Sony DSC-H300

Graffiti Types Present (Please tick all that apply)

Compass Drawn	✓	Merchant's marks	✓
Pentangles	✓	Mason's marks	✓
VV symbol	✓	Weapons/tools	✓
Pelta	✓	Mass dials	
Merels	✓	Musical	
Ladders		Heraldic	
Mesh pattern		Figures	✓
Crosses	✓	Animals	✓
Ausklis		Ragged Staff	
Text	✓	Hands/shoes/feet	✓
Architectural		Dot patterns	

For full details and description of the graffiti types please see the Volunteers Handbook or the website - www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk

Notes on graffiti:
Limited to arcade piers only.
Concentration at east end.
Emerging from beneath lime-wash.

Office use only:
County HER number:

Weather conditions are very important in judging the thoroughness and effectiveness of a survey. A bright sunny day will make it difficult to see some inscriptions.

Type of light source and camera used. LED or traditional?

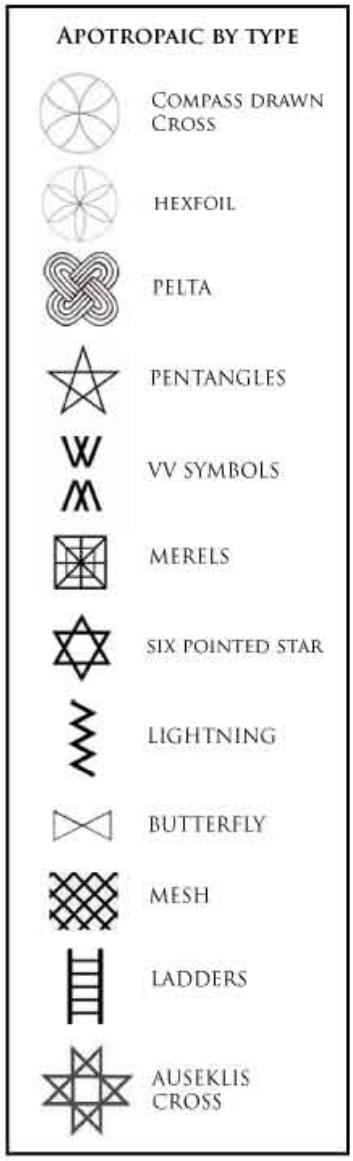
A simple sketch plan of the church layout, assigning a simple north/south number to each pier/pillar. These numbers are recorded on the Photo Record Sheet.

Notes on area of graffiti concentrations etc.

Please tick all categories that apply, as these form search fields on the database. If in doubt make a separate note on the reverse of the survey sheet.

Medieval Graffiti Types

- 1. Apotropaic
  - A. Compass drawn
    - B. Hexfoil
    - C. Crosses
    - D. Triskele
  - E. Pentangles
  - F. VV symbols
  - G. Merels
  - H. Pelta
  - I. Mesh
  - J. Lightning
  - K. Butterfly
  - L. Six pointed star
  - M. Ladders
  - N. Auseklis cross
- 2. Crosses
  - A. Calvary crosses
- 3. Ships
- 4. Text
- 5. Architectural
  - A. Building
    - B. Castles
    - C. Churches
    - D. Windmills
  - E. Design
- 6. Merchants marks
- 7. Masons marks
- 8. Mass dials (Scratch dials)
- 9. Musical
  - A. Instruments
  - B. Notation
- 10. Heraldic
  - A. Shield
  - B. Helmet
- 11. Figures
  - A. Full length figure
  - B. Faces
  - C. Demons
  - D. Grotesques
- 12. Animals
  - A. Horse
  - B. Deer
  - C. Dog
  - D. Bird
  - E. Fish
- 13. Ragged staff
- 14. Hands
- 15. Shoes/feet
- 16. Gaming boards
- 17. Weapons/tools
- 18. Plants
- 19. Dot patterns
- 20. Other



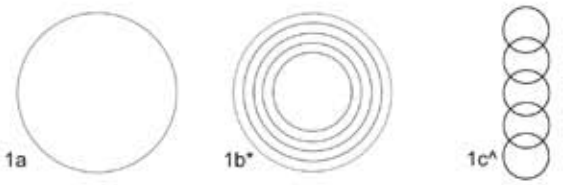
Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey

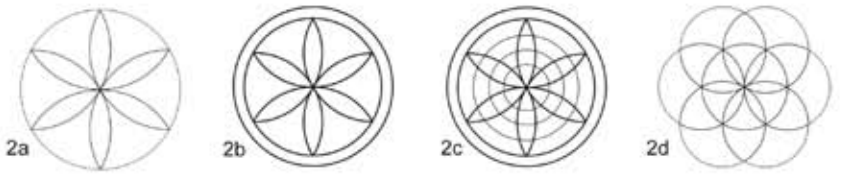
Suffolk Medieval Graffiti Survey

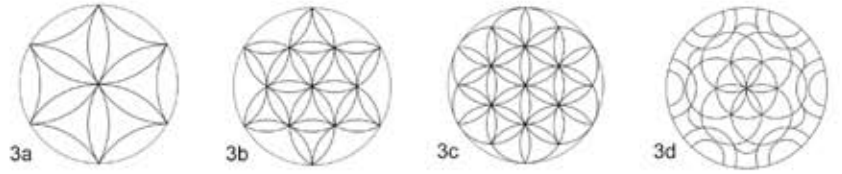
Typology of compass drawn designs

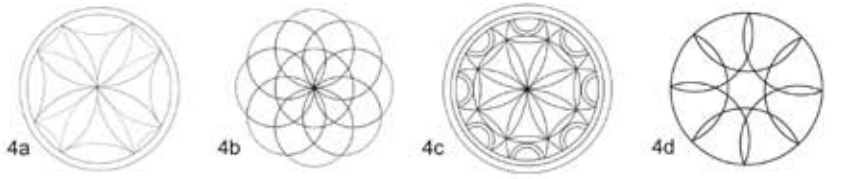
* - any number of concentric circles

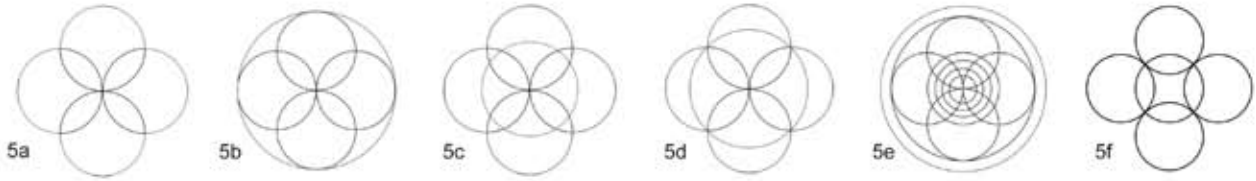
^ - any number of linked circles

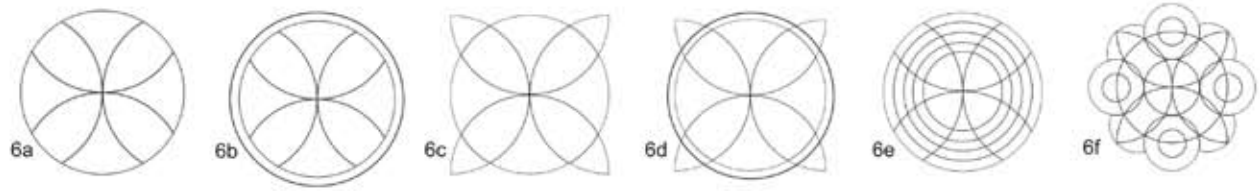


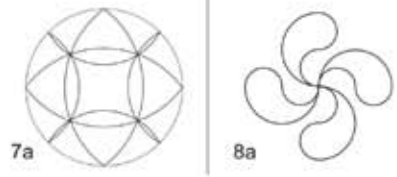


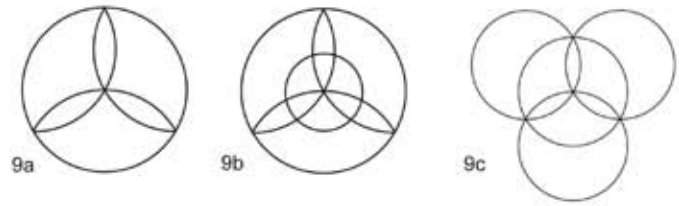












Revision: 5.1	
Date: June 2017	
Revised by: M. Champion	

9.0 Submitting a completed Survey: a guide to Dropbox

Once you have completed your church survey you will need to submit it to the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey. Given the size and large number of images each church survey creates it is simply impossible to submit the data via email. Most email clients will limit the size of email attachments that you can send. In addition, if using a tablet or phone to send messages, the email client will usually automatically down-size the attached images - making them easier to send - but useless for our purposes.

To submit completed survey data many of our volunteers use a free on-line file transfer service called 'Dropbox'.

Dropbox is an application which sets up a shared folder on your computer so that you can use it to share pictures, videos, documents and so on with anyone you like, anywhere in the world, via the internet. If you want to send us pictures of anything you have come across, Dropbox is the ideal way to do it - and it couldn't be simpler to use.

These notes are for Dropbox for PC. There are Mac and Linux versions of Dropbox as well.

How to set up Dropbox

1. First, download and install Dropbox from Dropbox.com. Follow the on-screen installation instructions and all will be well. It's a free download.

How to use Dropbox

1. In your Dropbox folder, create a folder for each individual church that you want to send images of, named by parish rather than dedication. For example, Litcham church would be simply 'Litcham', or 'Litcham, All Saints', rather than 'All Saints Litcham'.

2. Open the new folder, and then drag and drop the image you want to send into that folder.

3. A small blue icon will appear on the folder whilst the images are being uploaded. Once the uploading is completed the icon will turn green. The folder is now ready to be shared.

There are two mains ways in which you can share the folder.

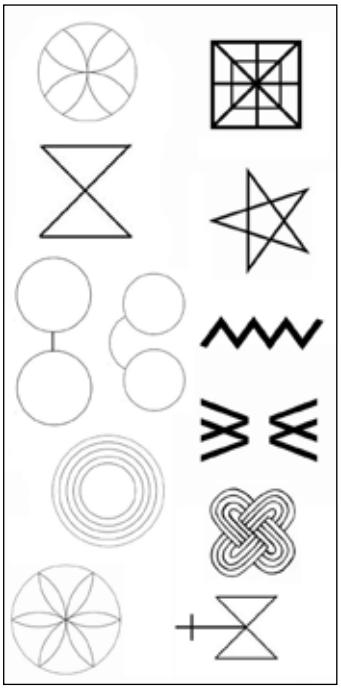
1. If you right click on the folder you want to share you'll see a whole load of options. If you click 'Share Dropbox link' a link to the folder will be copied to your clipboard, which you can then paste into an email and send to the survey. Please use the info@medieval-graffiti.co.uk email address.

2. If you click Share this folder, Dropbox will open a web page where you can add contacts you want to send the link to. Just beware the "Allow members to invite others" option is checked by default. We normally use the former method.

If you get stuck, there's help available on the Dropbox Help pages and they also have an online forum.

10.0 Interpretation

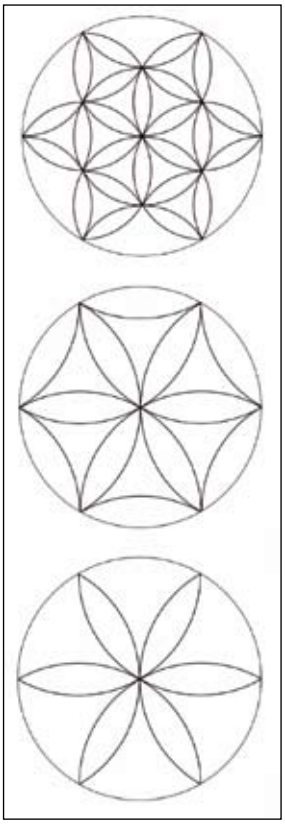
Ritual Protection Marks



Ritual Protection Marks are defined as symbols that have a overt 'apotropaic' function. Although many objects and artefacts may be considered to be apotropaic, or contain apotropaic elements, (derived from the Greek, meaning 'to turn away') this article largely concentrates upon those inscribed markings found in English medieval churches and, to differentiate them from the wider area of study, are referred to as 'ritual protection marks' throughout. A strict definition of what does, or does not, constitute a ritual protection mark is fraught with difficulties, and can depend upon a number of not entirely related factors. The same marking used in different circumstances and contexts may have widely differing meanings, not all of which can be considered apotropaic. As Philip Zeigler has observed, 'in medieval history, it sometimes seems that the more precisely a question is defined, the more certain it is that no answer will be forthcoming'.

In the very simplest of general terms these markings are believed to turn away, or ward off, evil. Apotropaic markings in general are often thought of as acting as a form of sympathetic magic, where, for example, the ritual scorching of newly built timbers would subsequently protect the building from fire and lightning strikes; quite literally 'fighting fire with fire'. However, whilst some ritual protection markings found in medieval churches may follow this form, the vast majority appear to be derived from a more complex system of beliefs. They can be considered to be the physical manifestations of a system of belief that thought in multiple layers of spiritual defence; essentially each symbol can be considered a protective marking that operated in addition to, but not separate from, the prayers of the medieval church.

Compass Drawn Designs



These compass drawn designs, sometimes referred to as hexfoils, are by far the most common single motif that we come across, with several thousand recorded to date. They can range from simple circles, through six petalled flower designs (known as Daisy Wheels or Hexfoils), to highly complex geometric constructions. Whilst the majority of them are small in size, being less than 100mm across, larger examples have been recorded that are nearly a metre across. It was originally believed that these designs were created by the actual masons who built the churches. They were thought to be either the mason's teaching their apprentices the basics of geometry or creating a guide for themselves to ensure that their own dividers were correctly adjusted.

Whilst some of the compass drawn designs were undoubtedly created by the medieval masons it now appears unlikely that they were responsible for anything other than a very small percentage. The sheer number of examples, inscribed into stonework, woodwork and even the lead linings of fonts, suggest that these designs were created by far more than a single trade group and that they had a clear and distinct meaning and function. At the present time we believe that the vast majority of these designs acted as 'ritual protection' (apotropaic) markings. There is no simple explanation of the form and function of apotropaic markings. At their most basic level they could be seen as bringing luck and protecting individuals from evil or malign influence. At a more complex quasi-theological level they were designed to trap the demons that roamed the world within their complex structure, quite literally pinning them to the walls.

Ship Graffiti

Although at first glance the presence of ship graffiti on the walls of a coastal church may appear straightforward. Local sailors and their families simply sketching what they saw every day. However, the work of the survey nationwide has raised a number of interesting questions that cast some doubt on the simplistic approach. Although many of these ship images are located in coastal churches, with particular concentrations around medieval ports, just as many are to be found inland. Indeed, examples have been recorded as far inland as Leicestershire, where it would be difficult to get any farther from the coast. Despite this all the examples recorded to date all show seagoing vessels rather than river craft.

In addition, surveys in churches such as St Nicholas, Blakeney, and St Thomas', Winchelsea, all appear to show a very distinct distribution pattern to the graffiti. Rather than being randomly scratched into the walls they appear to concentrate in particular areas of the church. At Blakeney, despite the whole church being covered by early inscriptions, all the ship graffiti appears on the south arcade, clustered around a side altar and an empty image niche. Each respects the other images around it, not covering them over, and archaeologists suggest that they were created over a period of at least two centuries. The suggestion, therefore, is that many of these ship images were in fact devotional in nature. Literally prayers made solid in stone. Exactly what these prayers were for remains something of a mystery. Where they thanks for a voyage safely undertaken, a prayer for a safe voyage yet to come, or perhaps a plea for a ship long overdue? We will probably never know, however it is possible they may be informal versions of votive ships, models which were displayed within churches at the time.

VV Symbol

Although probably one of the more common inscriptions to come across, on timber, stone, tombs and lead-work, it is also probably one of the most enigmatic. Often shown inverted to resemble a capital 'M', or even upon its side, some churches can be found to contain several dozen examples. The symbol has been interpreted as being associated with the cult of the Virgin Mary, and it has been suggested that the 'V V' have represented the initial letters of the term 'Virgo Virginum' (Virgin of Virgins). However, more recent research suggests this interpretation unlikely.

The possible connection between the 'VV' symbol and the Latin prayer or phrase 'Virgo Virginum' was first mooted by Brian Spencer in 1990, with particular reference to the examples of the motif he was coming across in relation to pilgrim souvenirs. The term 'Virgo Virginum' is the first line of the sung prayer 'O Virgo Virginum', one of the 'O Antiphons' which were chanted at vespers in the days leading up to the feast of the Nativity.In the traditional European catholic church there were seven of these Antiphons, each representing a name and virtue of Christ, with the English church adding the 8th , that of 'O Virgo Virginum', in the later Middle Ages.

Even then the phrase wasn't well known in England, being limited to only the larger religious institutions. The fact that the phrase was largely confined to England also makes the popularity of the symbol in mainland Europe difficult to explain. It is also one of the few ritual protection marks that made the occasional cross-over into more traditional church art form, appearing above the west door of Fakenham church, in North Norfolk, where it is associate with the Virgin Mary, and on the 15th century font at Aylsham church, where it is associated with the scourging of Christ.

However, the origins of the symbol may be far earlier. The earliest examples of this symbol being used for ritual purposes are to be found in the runic writing systems of Scandinavia, and even today it is still regarded as a Holy sign associated with life, death and fertility in many areas of the eastern Baltic.

Crosses

Whilst it is hardly surprising to find crosses inscribed into churches what is remarkable is where they are found. Almost 80% of all the cross inscriptions are not actually located within the main body of the church, but around the entrance doorway and most usually, if there is one, in the porch. These can vary from elaborate and deeply incised crosses to mere scratches on the surface. Often they appear in clusters, or in small groups and doorways such as that at Ludham or Colkirk can have as many as a dozen of these inscriptions.

Although traditionally thought to have been created by people as they went off on pilgrimage, or as thanksgiving for a safe return, there appears to be no evidence for such an interpretation, it only arising in recent centuries. It appears far more likely that these inscriptions are related to the former use that the church porch was put to in the middle ages. Although today the porch is usually little more than a place to hang the church notice board this wasn't the case in the past. The porch had an important function, with a number of ceremonies, such as marriage and the 'churching of women', partly taking place there. The porch also functioned as a parish office, with agreements and contracts being drawn up and witnessed there. It is possible that these crosses are related to transactions or agreements that were carried out in the porch, and were made as a result.

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, appearing on a number of early fonts and stonework – such as the superb example located at Sculthorpe church. Although not as common a discovery as many of the other ritual protections marks it does appear in a number of widely spread churches, suggesting that its meaning and symbolism was widely understood.

It has been suggested that it relates back to the story of Solomon's Knot in the Old Testament, in which King Solomon was given a ring by an archangel, inscribed with a powerful symbol that gave him power over demons. The folk belief associated this symbol, shown sometimes as a Star of David, Pentangle or 'endless knot', was that demons were curious – and rather stupid. If they saw a line then they had to follow it. In the case of the Solomon's knot the line was effectively endless – trapping the demon within the symbol itself.

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, such as Wighton, or many copies of the same symbol, such as Norwich Cathedral. Mason's marks tend to be quite simple markings, usually neatly executed and involving a series of straight lines. This gave them the advantage of being produced with the minimum of effort whilst still being distinctive.

Mason's marks can be located just about anywhere in a church. However, unlike the more general graffiti markings, they also tend to appear higher up on the stonework, in areas that could only be reached with the aid of scaffolding or a ladder. What isn't currently clear is whether mason's continued with the same markings throughout their careers? Did their apprentices develop a variation on the theme of their master's mark, or did they develop an entirely new symbol. Were mason's marks passed from generation to generation? The fundamental problem with interpretation of mason's marks is whether the same symbol appearing in two different churches was actually created by the same individual mason? Although not technically graffiti we also record all the examples that we come across.

Merchant's Marks

A Merchant's Mark was a distinctive symbol used by a merchant for a variety of purposes. It could be used to mark his goods and property, in signing documents and even on his personal seal. It was a symbol that would have been instantly recognisable, to both literate and illiterate, as belonging to a particular individual. It was, in effect, the 'logo' of the Middle Ages. However, it may well be that some of the merchant's marks that we come across do not actually relate to a particular individual but to a religious or trade guild instead. Much as the larger Livery Companies in cities such as London had their own specialist mark, it would appear that the practice was copied by the more modest local guilds, and at least a proportion of the markings we come across may relate to these organisations, particularly when associated with a side altar or guild chapel.

Merchant's marks can often be mistaken for mason's marks, and are often very similar in style and composition. However, they do show a number of distinct differences. Merchant's marks tend to be far larger than the average mason's mark, often appear less professionally executed and are far more likely to contain curved elements.

Heraldry

Coats of arms, heraldic elements and shields in general are relatively common finds amongst medieval graffiti. They can vary enormously in quality, from neatly executed full coats of arms, such as that on the east face of the chancel arch at Troston St Mary, to mere scratched outline shapes, such as those found at Swannington. Although we tend to expect well inscribed heraldic graffiti to be identifiable that simply hasn't been the case – with no inscription being able to be positively identified with any particular family. The reason for this is fairly straightforward. Heraldry relies upon colour for its full meaning to be apparent and the graffiti inscriptions contain no elements of colour. Therefore, even a neatly executed shield, with identifiable elements, but not colour, could potentially have belonged to as many as twenty or more families.

The most notable feature concerning heraldic graffiti is the fact that, of all the graffiti inscriptions found in churches, it appears to be the most likely to be subsequently defaced. In certain churches, such as Bale in North Norfolk, areas that contain several graffiti inscriptions are still clearly visible. However, amongst the many inscriptions it is clearly only those of a heraldic nature that have been defaced. It is thought that this may be because the heraldic graffiti was associated with particular individuals, whilst many of the other inscriptions were devotional in nature. It was therefore easy to strike at an individual or family by destroying their coat of arms, whilst less likely that devotional imagery would be attacked, thereby bringing down the wrath of God.

Pentangles

The pentangle is an extremely ancient symbol whose use has been recorded as far back 3000BC. Since the reformation the symbol has become associated with the magical arts and, in more recent centuries, it has become particularly associated with Wiccan practises and Victorian concepts of 'black' magic. However, during the middle ages it is clear that this symbol was regarded as a specifically Christian symbol with no 'evil' connotations and, more specifically, was seen as a symbol of protection. According to the 14th century poem, Gawain and the Green Knight, the symbol represented the five wounds of Christ, the five virtues of a Knight and was taken as a symbol of fidelity.

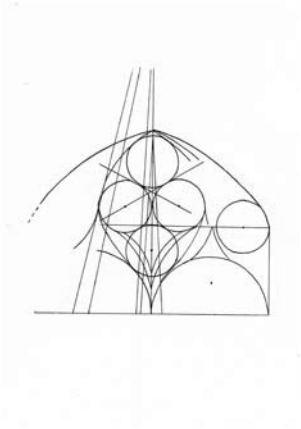
The pentangle is most certainly one of the less prolific ritual protection marks found in medieval churches. Compared to the compass drawn motifs it is relatively rare, appearing in only a dozen or so Norfolk churches surveyed to date. However, it appears in sufficient quantities in diverse locations for it to be regarded as an apotropaic marking.

Text Inscriptions

Although finding medieval text inscriptions in a church is most certainly one of the most exciting discoveries it is also one of the most frustrating. The temptation when finding text inscriptions is to try and read them. However, almost half the text inscriptions recorded to date have remained undecipherable. In many cases this is simply because the inscription itself is too worn to do anything other than recognise it as text and identify the odd letter.

In other cases the problems lie with the person who created the inscription in the first place. Medieval Latin inscriptions, most probably created by a cleric, are often truncated, abbreviated and incomplete, as was common practice at the time. However, unless all the letters are extremely clear it is often not possible to establish exactly what the abbreviated word was originally intended to be. In addition, certain text inscriptions, such as the 'cryptogram' located at All Saints, Litcham, tend to merge the letters into each other, making the final down stroke of one letter also be the first down stroke of the next letter. Combined together these factors do make text inscriptions difficult to decipher for even the most experienced historian.

Architectural Inscriptions



Alongside the more informal graffiti inscriptions the volunteers have also occasionally come across sketches, designs and working drawings actually created by the medieval craftsmen who worked on the church. Until the beginning of the survey such architectural designs were thought to be incredibly rare, with only a couple of dozen having been discovered in the whole of the UK. Since the survey began we have managed to double the number of known examples. They can vary tremendously in scale, location and detail, but all share the common theme – that they have been created using precision tools. The largest of the examples located at Binham Priory was nearly two metres tall, whilst the sketch for a window design at Weston Longville was only 140mm across.

In terms of location, the designs can be found just about anywhere where a flat surface was available, although the rear of rood screens was particularly popular. Such flat surfaces would have made a perfect drawing board for the craftsmen and, as the lines are now exceedingly difficult to make out, many of the examples have remained unnoticed for centuries. Having located at least one example on medieval plaster it is also likely that a great many more of these designs have been lost in relatively recent centuries as medieval plaster in poor condition has been replaced and renewed. Whilst telling us little in terms of social history, these designs can tell us a great deal about the medieval design process and the building of these amazing East Anglian churches.

Human Figures

A common feature of early graffiti inscriptions is the number of full length figure and faces that are recorded. Many of the figures, such as those from Troston, show clear medieval figures with hands raised in attitudes of prayer, and are clearly devotional in nature. Others, such as the full length medieval female figure on the chancel arch at Swannington, are more ambiguous in nature. Many of the faces also appear stylised to the point of caricature, and it is difficult to suggest that they have any devotional aspects. A few examples might certainly show more secular activities.

At Marsham there is a small and crudely executed scene at the base of one of the piers that shows two figures. The first, shown with sword and shield, is clearly meant to be a knight or soldier of some sort. The opposite figure appears to be a beast or dragon of some sort. However, close inspection reveals that the dragon figure appears, instead of feet, to show a fringe of some sort. Such fringes were commonly seen on medieval players costumes, such as the Norwich 'Snap-dragons', and were designed to hide the feet of the individual inside the costume. It may well be then that the Marsham scene, rather than depicting a battle between a knight and dragon, actually shows a scene from a medieval mummers play. Perhaps a play enacted in the very same church

Merels

These often small inscriptions have been the subject of antiquarian interest for many years, although with little agreement as to their meaning and function. Their similarity to a number of medieval board games, most notably Merels and Nine-Mans-Morris, have led to them often being thought of as smaller versions of the same games. Indeed, a number of early writers on the subject described the simplest rectangles with crossed lines as ‘three-mans-morris’, or even the unlikely ‘one-mans-morris’.

The problem with such an interpretation is fairly straightforward, in that gaming boards, such as that shown at bottom right, ARE found in our churches and cathedrals. However, these are invariably located on horizontal surfaces such as benches and window reveals, whilst most of the other motifs are being recorded on vertical surfaces. The motif also turns up in a number of manuscript illustrations, where it is associated with astrology and the making of horoscopes, and it shares many features with other recognised symbols of protection. It is also notable that at sites such as Swannington, Lidgate and Ashwell, the same symbol is to be found in concentrations of other ritual protection marks, clearly suggesting that it was regarded as performing a similar function. However, as with many symbols found amongst the graffiti, the meaning and function of any motif may change and be entirely dependent upon the circumstances in which it was created

Musical Graffiti

Musical notation is amongst the very rarest of all types of early church graffiti, with only a few dozen high quality examples being recorded across the entire country. In most cases the inscriptions are to be found in our larger religious buildings, such as Norwich cathedral and York Minster, and most examples identified to date appear to be examples of chant or plainsong. They are also often shown on a four line stave, with the modern five line stave not entering general usage until the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries.

The reason for this bias towards the abbeys, priories and cathedrals may be a relatively simple one. During the Middle Ages is was only at these larger monastic sites that musical notation was regularly used and taught - and it is no coincidence that many of our finest choir schools are still attached to sites such as Westminster Abbey and Winchester Cathedral.

This doesn’t of course mean that music wasn’t an important aspect of the medieval church in even the most rural of parishes, for it most certainly was. However, in the villages of medieval England the formal teaching of music and musical notation appears to have been exceptionally rare, with most church music being passed verbally from person to person. The chants of the church services were to be sung and listened to rather than scratched into the stones…

Mass Dials

Mass dials, also known as scratch dials, have long been the subject of academic and antiquarian study, being amongst the very first informal church inscriptions to be systematically record. Indeed, it is a rarity to open a county archaeological journal from the 1920s or 1930s that does not contain some reference to them, and over 6000 have so far been documented. The traditional interpretation is that these simple sundials were used by either the parish priest, congregation or bell ringers to calculate the correct time for services. Most usually located on the south side of the church they take many forms and come in all shapes and sizes. If found elsewhere on the church then the traditional interpretation is that the stone into which they were carved has been moved or recycled.

However, these traditional interpretations are now seen as being open to question. The number of these dials being found on the north side of churches, where they simply wouldn’t work, is notable - and the likelihood of them all being on recycled stone is slim. Many churches also have multiple and identical mass dials, all of which rather suggests that there is much more to these simple inscriptions than first meets the eye…

Animals etc...

Animals, birds and fish are common motifs amongst the early graffiti inscriptions, and are to be found all over the country. Many of the bird inscriptions are to be found associated with other known religious motifs, particularly crosses, suggesting that they may be linked to several Christian stories. In medieval art the Holy Ghost is often depicted as a bird, and such inscriptions might well be supplications aimed directly at an element of the Trinity.

However, the interpretation foe many of these inscriptions may be far more mundane. What is clear is that there are many types of animals that we might expect to find amongst the graffiti, but are simply not to be found. The farm animals that play such a major role in the medieval economy, that provided the money to actually build the great medieval churches - the sheep, pigs and cattle - are only rarely shown. Instead it is the animals of the woods, forests and the hunt that we are coming across - the deer, hunting dogs and hares.

Shoes/hands

One of the universal motifs that occur all over the country, and throughout history, appear to be the creation of hand and shoe inscriptions. Echoing the very earliest of cave art, these inscriptions perhaps give more of a feeling of real people having been present than any others.

Many of the inscriptions are clearly drawn around actual hands and shoes, making them particularly individual and personal, and it has been suggested that some of the medieval examples show possible links with site of pilgrimage. However, shoes in particular are also inked to many other early beliefs, sometimes being concealed within buildings to ward off evil, and have known links with church ceremonies such as weddings.

In the post medieval period some of these inscriptions are undoubtedly memorial in nature, appearing with names, initials and dates inscribed within them. Some may be commemorating a visit to a site, whilst others, particularly those found on the lead of the church roof, appear to commemorate works undertaken on the building.

Dot Patterns

A common find in many churches, both those with and without graffiti inscriptions, are multiple dot patterns. In some cases the dots are clearly just being used as the terminus points for other inscriptions, such as crosses or stars, but in others their function is less obvious. A lot of these dot patterns have been deeply inscribed into the surface of the stone or plaster, and they do tend to be found in groups.

In a number of cases, and at a number of sites, the dots appear to follow numerical values, being found in generally uneven numbers, and commonly in groups of three, five, seven and nine. Certain uneven numbers had considerable significance in the medieval church, such as the Trinity and the seven sacraments, and numbers were also regarded as powerful within aspects of medieval magic.

It has been suggested that the holes or dots are the result of local and regional practice of folk medicine. In some areas, particularly in France and Spain, it was until recently believed that the stone or plaster of the church, ground to a fine powder and mixed with wine, was an effective cure for many illnesses and diseases. This may well have been the case in England also, although there is no direct evidence to support the idea. Indeed, the significance of these dot patterns may contain elements of any or all of the above, but it is certainly still a matter of some debate.

Ragged Staff

The Ragged Staff motif is one that is well known to anybody with an interest in medieval heraldry. The ‘Bear and Ragged Staff’ was used as a ‘livery’ symbol by the Earl’s of Warwick throughout much of the later Middle Ages, and the Earl’s servants and retainers are commonly depicted as just wearing the symbol of the Ragged Staff as a badge. As a symbol it also turns up fairly regularly amongst church graffiti.

As long ago as 1967 Violet Pritchard suggested that the presence of the Ragged Staff amongst church graffiti was more than simply associated with heraldry. The number of times it was recorded, often in association with religious imagery, and the fact that it was the only ‘livery’ symbol to appear amongst the graffiti, led to the suggestion that it might indeed be a religious symbol. This idea was supported by the discovery of a number of medieval lead ‘pilgrim’ badges depicting the Ragged Staff, but also displaying religious mottoes.

The general consensus today is that the symbol most certainly has a religious function - but that we aren’t entirely certain just what that function might be. There were certainly a number of saints with whom a staff was associated, with St Christopher perhaps being the most likely candidate.

Taper Burn Marks

If you have ever been inside an ancient medieval or Tudor house the chances are that you may have noticed deep scorch or burn marks on parts of the building, most obviously on the beam above a fireplace. Known today as ‘taper burn marks’, these scorches were for a long time believed to be the result of accidents with unguarded candles, or simply the work of children playing with fire. However, in recent decades it has been suggested that such marks were very deliberately made, and actually had a ritual function.

Recent studies have shown that these markings turn up all over the timbers of many early houses, and often in places where there is little chance of a candle having been left alone - or even able to get to. These include roof timbers, wall plates and hidden beneath the floor. Experiments have also shown that, to create the very distinctive tear-drop shaped mark, a taper or candle has to be applied to the timbers at a very specific angle. The markings are also to be found in churches as well, most often on the inside of the main door.

The current thinking is that many, if not all, of these marks were applied to the timbers during the period of construction, and some before the timbers were even put in place. The idea behind their creation, it is believed, was to guard the building against lightning - and more specifically fire. It can, in some respects, be thought of as inoculating the building - literally ‘fighting fire with fire’.

Consecration Crosses

A once common site in churches everywhere, these crosses are often today found as only outlines in the stonework, and as such are sometimes mistaken for graffiti.

When a church was first constructed, or significantly altered, it had to be consecrated by the local Bishop prior to worship taking place in the building. In essence, the structure had to be made into a sacred space. To do this the Bishop would bless the building and anoint it with holy oil, twelve times outside and twelve times inside. Each of the places that were anointed with oil would then be marked with a cross - known today as a ‘consecration cross’.

When originally created each of these crosses would have been painted, most usually in a red pigment, and surviving examples can be found in many churches across England. However, in most churches the pigment has now been lost, leaving only the setting-out lines of the crosses around the walls.

11.0 Additional Resources

If you want to learn more about early graffiti inscriptions there are a number of ways open to you.

Bibliography: the project website hosts a regularly updated 'graffiti bibliography' - covering all aspects of early inscriptions and ritual markings in the UK. A number of these resources are available freely online. You can find the bibliography here - http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk/page9.html

Facebook: As well as the NMGS page, there is a Facebook group dedicated to early graffiti and inscriptions. The English Medieval Graffiti group page can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/groups/1612541522308776/

A Church Near You: website maintained by the Church of England listing details of all the current parish churches in England, including location details and contact details. https://www.achurchnearyou.com/

12.0 Protecting our heritage

Heritage Crime has become a major problem in the UK, with churches being particularly hard hit. Lead theft and general vandalism are causing hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of damage each and every year. Anyone visiting a church or historic site needs to be especially vigilant. If you see something suspicious - report it.

999 - national emergency number

101 - national non-emergency number

0800 555 111 - Crimestoppers