

# Templates on the wall:

# MEDIEVAL DESIGN

To design and build a church wasn't a simple process. Each block of stone had to be created to exactly fit the next, and even the slightest mistake could lead to disaster. To make sure that mistakes didn't happen the masons had wooden templates that they used as patterns for each stone.

To make these templates the master mason had to create a full sized design of whichever part of the church he was currently working on. In larger buildings, like York Minster and Wells Cathedral, these designs were carved into a specially prepared plaster floor - known as a tracing floor. Once the tracing and templates had been made a new layer of plaster could be laid on the floor - leaving it smooth and ready to begin a new design upon.

These tracing floors are only found in the largest of medieval buildings, and those building a parish church would have to make do with what they could find. In many cases this meant creating the designs on any flat surface that might be available, like a wall, or the back of a rood screen - the timber screen that separated the main body of the church (nave) from the chancel at the east end. Very occasionally these rare designs can still be seen today in our churches.

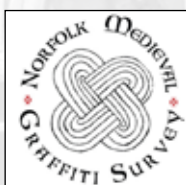
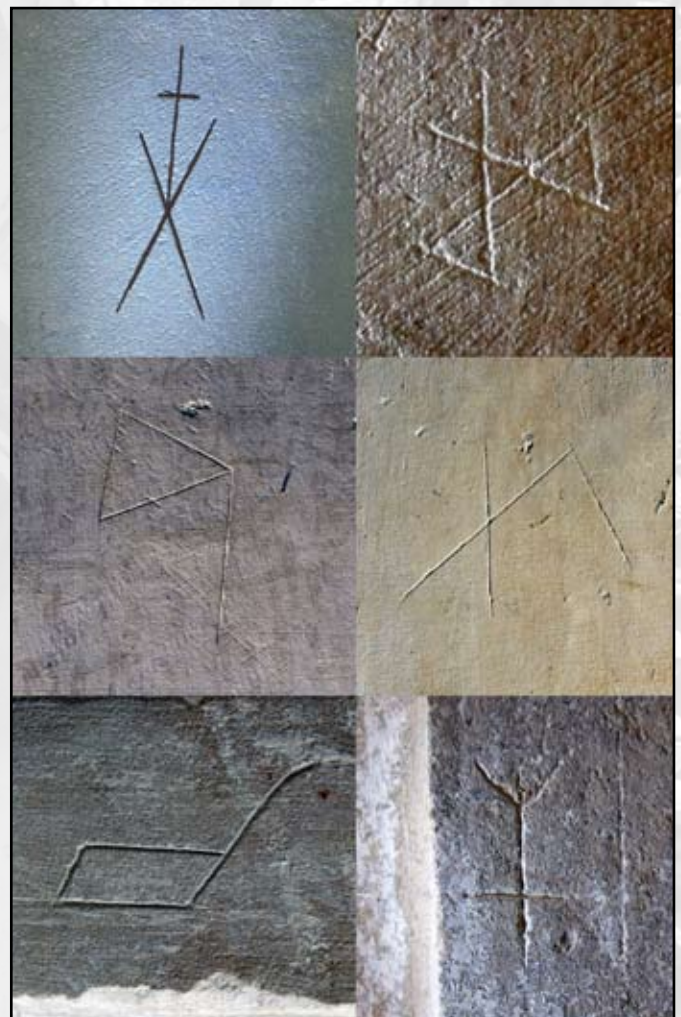
Why do you think these surviving medieval designs are so important?

What can they tell us about the medieval design process?

## Mason's marks

The masons working on a church each marked the stones and areas that they had worked on with their own special mark - known today as a mason's mark. Usually made with chisels, and made up of a series of straight lines, these distinctive markings can tell us a good deal about the masons who worked on different churches across the region. The marks were a form of signature, but also acted as a form of quality control. However, sometimes the marks aren't quite so straightforward. The same marks can appear on churches that were built several centuries apart, and are hundreds of miles away from each other.

Can you think of any reasons why this might be the case?



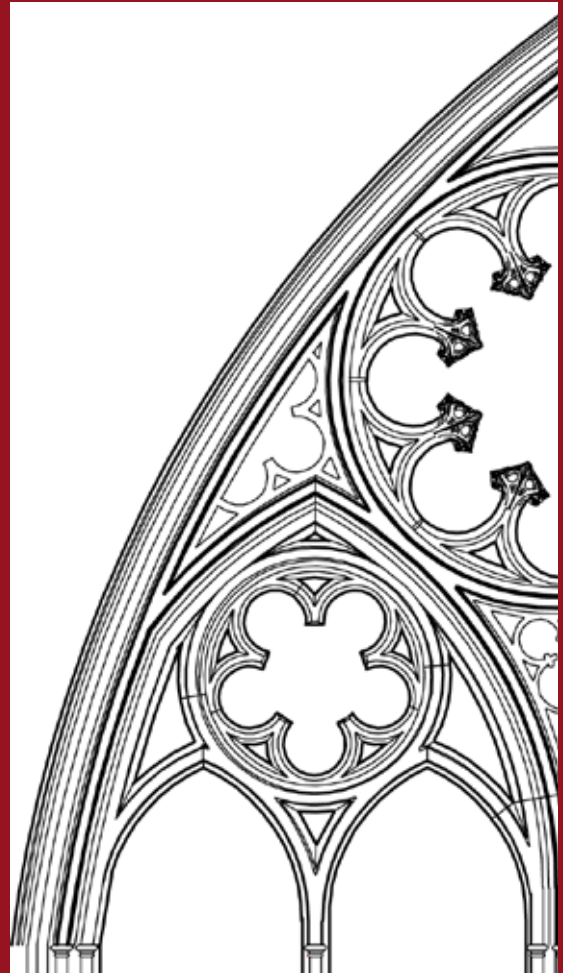


## An architectural revolution...

Before the early decades of the 13th century designing a window in a church was fairly straightforward. You simply built a wall, and then cut a hole in it. However, by cutting the hole you weakened the wall, so if the window was too big you risked the wall collapsing. As a result medieval masons were limited to just how big they could make windows. The system was known as 'plate tracery'.

Then, in the early 13th century, a new system of window building arrived in England from Europe. The system involved creating windows with elaborate stonework patterns, but unlike the older plate tracery, this new 'bar tracery' was structural - meaning it actually made the wall stronger rather than weaker. Suddenly masons could make large windows without fear of the whole building collapsing.

The introduction of bar tracery led to a church-building revolution in England. New churches were appearing all over the country with massive areas of glass, filling the building with light and colour. The very first example to be built in this country was actually in Norfolk - at Binham Priory. Sadly the great west window failed in the late 18th century, but we have a pretty good idea of what it once looked like, because the master mason left his designs on the wall - and they are still there to this day.



**S**o, you are a medieval master mason, and you've been asked to build a new church for a rich parish in north Norfolk.

You will need stone for the walls, finer stone for the carved windows and doorways, timber for the roof, lead for the roof covering, glass for the windows, and tiles for the floor. The stone is from Normandy and Lincolnshire, the timber from Suffolk, the lead and glass from Norwich, and the tiles from Canterbury. All of this has to be ordered, paid for, and transported to the site of the new church - to arrive on time.

You are also going to need masons, carpenters, plumbers (lead-workers), glaziers, plasterers, painters, and general labourers - who will all need somewhere to stay and food to eat.

How many people do you think would be involved in the building of the average parish church? How long do you think it might have taken? What do you think are the main things that might go wrong - and how can you minimise the risks?