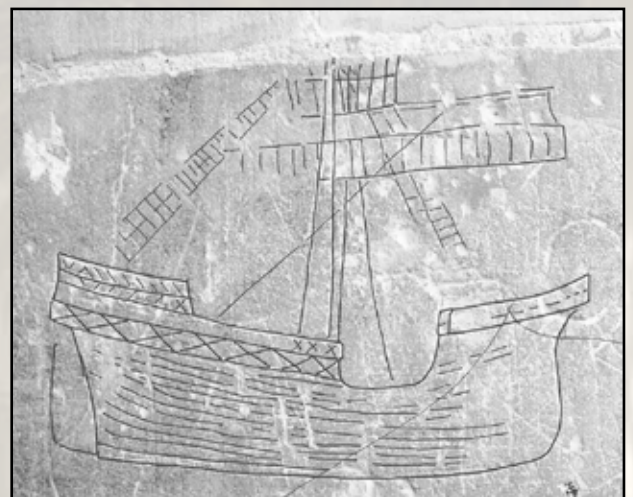


Changing Attitudes towards MEDIEVAL GRAFFITI

Today most graffiti is seen as something that is destructive and anti-social - and most people would call it vandalism. It certainly isn't something that we would want to see in a church or historic building. However, this is a very new and modern idea.

Before the middle of the nineteenth century leaving your mark on a historic building was seen as totally acceptable - and just about everyone was doing it - from the Generals of the French Emperor Napoleon to the British poet Lord Byron. In fact, it wasn't until about 1850 that we even had the word 'graffiti', which was invented to describe the ancient writings on the wall then being discovered at Roman sites like Pompeii. And when the word was originally invented it had no negative aspects to it at all. The writing on the wall was just that - another form of writing.

1. Why do you think attitudes to graffiti began to change in the middle of the nineteenth century?



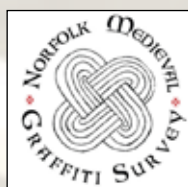
ANY PERSON WRITING ON
OR SCRATCHING THE FABRIC
OF THIS MONUMENT WILL BE
LIABLE TO PROSECUTION

MINISTRY OF WORKS

*Top: Fifteenth century
text inscription.
Ludham, Norfolk.*

*Middle: late medieval
ship graffiti from
Norwich cathedral.*

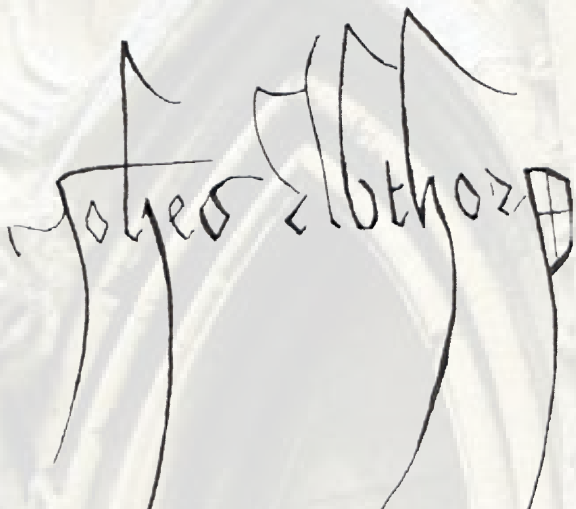
*Bottom: Compass
drawn design and
associated marks
from St Mary's church,
Troston.*



What many people find quite surprising is just how many of our medieval churches are covered in hundreds of early graffiti inscriptions - some dating all the way back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. However, there is a big difference between much of the modern graffiti and the medieval graffiti. The majority of medieval graffiti is devotional in nature - being either prayers or marks to ward off evil.

This changes in the sixteenth century, at the Reformation. After this time the graffiti becomes much more like modern graffiti - a collection of names, initials and dates. However, some of this later graffiti can tell us things about a parish history that we simply couldn't find out elsewhere. At Cley church, on the North Norfolk coast, builders working on the church in the early nineteenth century left an entire list of their accounts on the wall - and got the maths wrong too.

2. Do you think graffiti is a good thing or a bad thing?



Fear on the walls...

At Acle in the Norfolk Broads a strange graffiti inscription was uncovered in the church. Written on the walls in charcoal, it tells of a plague that hit the village during the Middle Ages, killing many of the villagers. The graffiti says that the disease respected neither age or youth, rich or poor - but simply killed them all - with no warning. Someone, perhaps fearing that the whole village would be wiped out, left the message scrawled across the church walls - a message for those who came later, and perhaps a warning to the future...



When most people think about early graffiti they think about writing - text graffiti. However, text makes up a very small percentage of the medieval inscriptions that have been recorded. This is partly explained by the relatively low literacy rates during the Middle Ages.

When text inscriptions are recorded they are often found to have been created by the parish priest - another sign that early graffiti was generally considered acceptable.

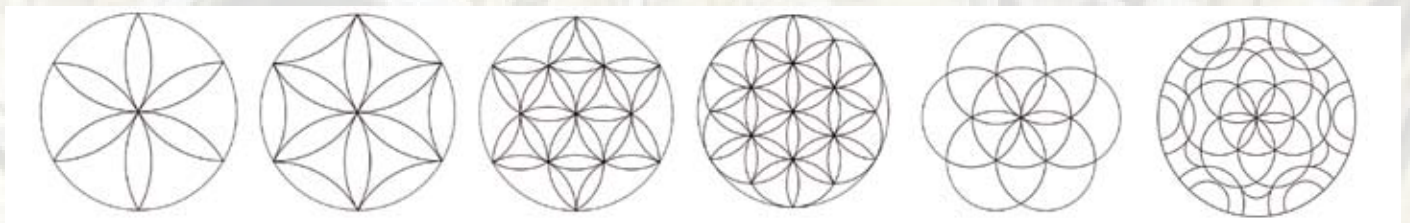


What we find on the wall can tell us a great deal about the past, but sometimes we can also learn a lot by noticing what isn't there as well...

The medieval church was full of images of angels and demons - in the stained glass, the wall paintings, the wood carvings. Just about everywhere you looked you would see images of angels and demons. However, when it comes to the graffiti, you only ever find the demons. No angels - just demons. In fact, the walls of our medieval churches are covered in graffiti demons.

So why don't we find graffiti of Angels? Perhaps it is because the graffiti only reflects what was really important to the medieval church-goers. And, in their minds, demons were very real indeed.

It was demons that caused sudden illnesses. It was demons that caused unexplained deaths. It was demons that brought forth thunderstorms from a cloudless Summer sky. If you spoke a prayer you didn't expect to an angel to turn up and answer it in person, but the evidence for demons was all around you. Like the plague graffiti from Acle, people put their fears on the walls...



Today much of this early graffiti is regarded as a historical resource. Teaching us about aspects of the past, and the people who lived then, that we simply can't get from any other source. It is a direct form of evidence that tells us about their hopes, dreams and fears. In some cases, these strange scratchings on the walls may be the only mark that person has left on this world.



Everyone was doing it...

According to legend, when Princess Elizabeth (later Queen Elizabeth I) was being held prisoner by her sister Queen Mary I at Woodstock, she wrote a message on a pane of glass in one of the windows.

"Much suspected by me, nothing proved can be. Quoth Elizabeth. Prisoner"

Unfortunately, the palace of Woodstock was destroyed during the English Civil War in the seventeenth century - taking the graffiti with it...

Today many of these medieval graffiti inscriptions are difficult to see. Many of them are only visible in particular lighting conditions, and the chances are that you have walked past many hundreds of them without even noticing they were there. However, this wouldn't have been the case when they were first made.

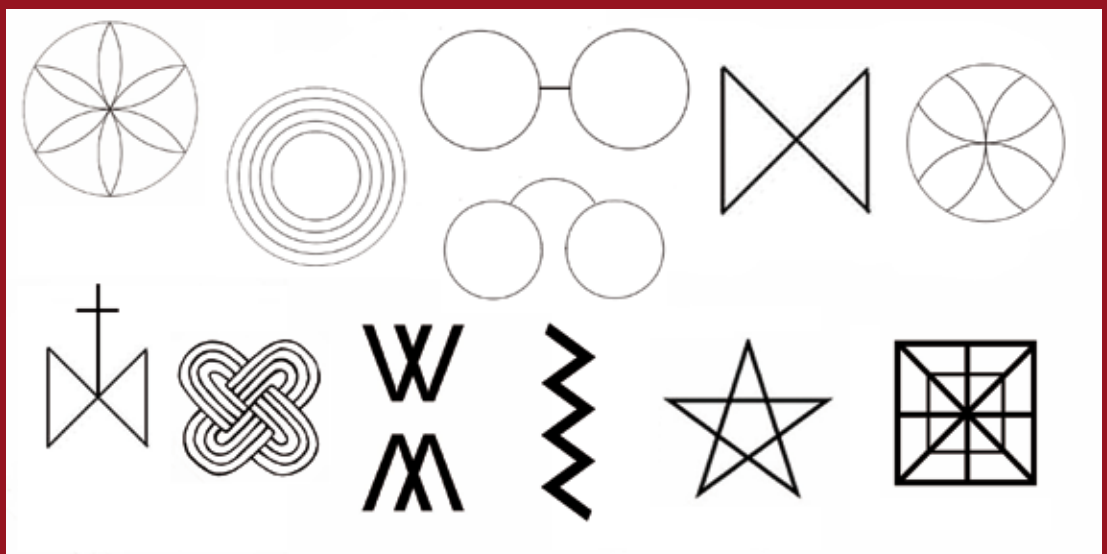
Back in the Middle Ages just about every church or cathedral you went into would have been covered in medieval wall paintings. The walls would have been bright with images of saints and demons - and the graffiti was scratched through this pigment to reveal the pale stone beneath. Far from being hidden away and difficult to see, the graffiti would have been one of the most obvious things you saw when you walked into a church.

3. So how does that change how we think about attitudes to medieval graffiti?



Witch marks

One of the most common types of medieval graffiti in any church are those known as ritual protection marks - or 'witch marks'. Despite the name these marks weren't made by witches, but were designed to 'ward off' evil spirits. These markings were designed to be used in addition to the prayers of the church, rather than instead of them - a physical and visual representation of a prayer. They are commonly found on old houses as well as churches, and continued to be used until at least the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.



Right: examples of typical ritual protection marks (witch marks)