

Medieval Graffiti; the Hidden History

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Matthew is the project director for Suffolk Medieval Graffiti Survey. The survey started in 2010 in Norfolk using 80-100 volunteers. Now graffiti is considered to be anti-social but prior to 150 years ago it was considered acceptable. All memorials in churches were for the upper classes but graffiti could be by anyone. It can be found in 60-70% of churches, 28,000 in Norfolk so far with 5,000 to 12,000 in Norwich cathedral.

Types of Graffiti.

A) Apotropaic symbols are protection against evil.

1. 30-40% are compass drawn daisy wheels. There are three theories for these:

a) the work of masons to teach their apprentices geometry.

b) Atkinson in Cambridge suggested they are consecration crosses.

Churches are anointed 12 times inside and 12 times outside marked by a cross. However, there are too many for either a) or b).

c) Seal of Solomon. He was given a ring by an archangel with this symbol for protection from demons. Demons are stupid and follow a line and are trapped going round and round.

2. Crosses. Found round doorways and in porches; could have been drawn by pilgrims. In the Middle Ages some services e.g. the churcing of women and part of the marriage service took place in the porch.

3. Pentangles. This was a Christian symbol which is now connected with witchcraft. Images of devils have a pentangle on top of them to counteract evil. Images of people have them alongside for protection.

B) Architectural designs for the church were drawn by masons often on the back of rood screens.

C) Text - only 5% of all samples - many names. Half of text cannot be read. In Ludham church text found upside down because the stone had been replaced the wrong way up when rebuilding.

D) Faces.

E) Heraldic symbols- difficult to recognise because they need to be coloured.

F) Music - very rare, found in cathedrals.

G) Merchants marks - guild or company logo, also mason marks.

H) Ships and seagoing vessels, single masted with crow's nest, sails furled, at anchor. Many in Norwich cathedral.

Lidgate Church is covered in graffiti with texts from the C14th to modern day. They include a Latin inscription by John Lidgate who could have been the poet. Many windmills appear on the north arcade.

Blakeney Church is covered in inscriptions. There are ships on the piers of the south arcade, most nearest to the altar to St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors. Inscribed over 200-300 years, they could be prayers.

Most graffiti does not show up very well except with oblique light from a torch. The walls of medieval churches were brightly painted and graffiti was incised using knives or snips so that the stone showed through.

More information can be found on www.medieval-graffiti-suffolk.co.uk