



Medieval graffiti

So much of the formal imagery in churches founded in the Middle Ages reflected the lives of the more prosperous people in the community. However, many medieval churches also have records of the attitudes and beliefs of the majority of people who would have been largely illiterate. Painstaking searching of the stone walls and columns in our earliest churches has revealed a wealth of graffiti providing a window into the minds of our medieval forebears. *Medieval graffiti: The lost voices of England's churches* (Ebury Press 2015) by archaeologist Matthew Champion is an excellent guide to what graffiti can be found in churches from the largest cathedrals to more modest parish churches. Although much of the research for the book is based on churches in East Anglia and the south of England, Chapman believes there are many more examples of graffiti in other parts of the country waiting to be discovered.

Chapman's book has sections on particular types of graffiti, for example, pentangles, geometric designs, crosses, ships, heraldry, merchants' marks, music and masons' marks each illustrated with drawings as well as photographs. He points out that the interiors of medieval churches were highly coloured and that graffiti would have stood out far more clearly than they do today. Moreover, these images, unlike modern graffiti, were both accepted and acceptable. They had meaning and function as the prayers, memorials, hopes and fears of the medieval parish.



This example of graffiti is known as Solomon's knot motif or the 'swastika pelta' and is found on fonts and above doorways in early Norman churches. The endless knot design was thought to confuse and entrap evil spirits. It is one of several designs believed to be ritual protection marks. Others include zigzag marks possibly representing lightning and intended to keep buildings safe from lightning strikes, a very real threat.



This compass-drawn motif is one of the most common types of graffiti, with some churches containing multiple examples. Chapman points out that the design could equally have been made with small shears. The design was a regular feature of church decorations from the late 11th Century. Chapman discusses the possible meanings conveyed by this design from a type of consecration cross, the work of medieval masons training other masons in the basics of geometric shapes to a ritual protection mark designed to ward off the 'evil eye' and make the parish church a safer place for the community. As well as being carved into stonework, many parish chests have this compass-drawn design to give spiritual protection to the chests' contents.

On a column below the tower in St Mary's Church a version of a hexfoil can be seen clearly. This compass-drawn design, right, consists of two outer circles with six petals, known as a 'daisy wheel'.

TDLHS is fortunate that Mike Goddard has been making a careful record of masons' marks in St Mary's, involving a detailed scrutiny of its interior. Put there by the men involved in the construction of the building Chapman points out that these marks are well-cut and neatly executed, usually consisting of straight-cut lines and symbolising pride in a job well done.

Chapman's book concludes with some sites to visit and mentions Lincoln Cathedral and Beverley Minster as having fine collections of graffiti.



See also <<http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk>>