

The Men who Made St Mary's

Most of the building that we see now was completed, with some minor exceptions, in two main phases: the lower two stages of the tower (from the early 1200s) and the nave, aisles and porches (in the very late 1300s and early 1400s). Masons' marks occur in both parts of these major re-builds. No masons' marks have so far been found in the chancel, the south porch, or the chapels of St Helen and St Luke.

The lower stages of the tower display many examples of one particular mark, but recording in that area is unfinished and a greater variety of masons' marks can be found on the stonework of the grand and prestigious major rebuilding of the nave. This update concentrates only on that.

Progress has been made in identifying the masons' marks within the accessible parts of this area of the building and the report presents some of the findings so far. However, interpretations may change as more evidence is gathered, and it could be that some of the suggestions here are amended later. There are marks of other kinds within the church, but this report is solely about the masons' marks in the fourteenth/fifteenth century rebuild of the church and what we can learn from them.

The conclusions that can be reached are limited by much evidence having been lost through decay, over-zealous cleaning or negligent destruction. The proportion lost can be illustrated by these examples of the numbers of marked stones in the pillars. Amongst the octagonal pillar blocks 34 out of 40 are marked (85%); the respond (half pillar) half-blocks have 15 marked out of 28 (53%); the moulded half-bases 6 marked out of 16 (37%) and the sub half-bases c.4? marked out of 16 (25%). More marks have survived on the north arcade pillars and responds (c.33?) than on the south (c.23?). This means that the conclusions reached here, particularly about the organisation of the building campaign and the work of individuals can only ever be tentative. The badly eroded windows and porch interiors provide minimal evidence. (Seven marks on the north windows, one on the south, eleven in the north porch.)

Documentary and heraldic evidence for this rebuild suggests a date somewhere between the early 1370s and the mid-1440s. Evidence from the masons' marks suggests that the bulk of the work was completed in a much shorter timespan. Some of the conclusions that can be inferred so far are:

- A core group of five masons shared the dressing of the octagonal blocks and half-blocks that make up the six pillars and four responds of the north and south arcades. (Their marks illustrate this article.) Each pillar or respond was built up from blocks cut by between 2 and 4 different masons. There are indications that a fifth mark, in the form of a circle, which appears on one or two examples of each mason's work, probably made by the master mason's compasses, was possibly a "quality control" mark.

- Rebuilding seems to have started with the north arcade. The westernmost pillar in the south arcade may have been completed after the four responds or half-pillars at the east and west ends, and the easternmost pillar of the south arcade last of all.
- There is some evidence of specialisation in the types of stone cut and in the parts of the building worked in during the building of the arcades. After the construction of these the group of five split up to work on different parts of the building and were joined as the work progressed eventually by four others who were attached to the different teams, each containing one or two members of the original group - perhaps as supervisors. The four recruits could have been additions to, or replacements for, some of the original team. Their marks are also shown below.
- The north aisle windows and the rood loft stair seem to have been begun immediately after the completion of the north and south arcades and the stone for some the south aisle windows was being cut at the same time as that for the north porch.
- There is evidence for the bulk of the rebuilding - except for the south porch, the upper stage of the tower and the SE chapel - being achieved within at most the career span of the core team, because, with the exception of the south aisle windows, all areas show evidence of work done by members of that group and even the south aisle windows were being worked on at the same time as the north porch.
- This cuts down appreciably the length of time it probably took to finish the bulk of the rebuild. There was then a hiatus (indicated by the unfinished tower vault) while extra funds were raised. Further investigation may cast light on how long this was. Judging by the gloriously ornate “crown” the tower was eventually given, the fund-raising was pretty successful!

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Explanations for the conclusions arrived at.

“Quality control”?

There is a number of circle-shaped graffiti on the lower blocks of the pillars. Some are freehand. However, eight, single, incontrovertibly compass-drawn circles of about 1½” in diameter appear on some of the blocks. Some are on blocks too high for them to be later graffiti. Six are in the north arcade. Each appears on a block which is also marked by one of the other masons. Two blocks for each of 2t1, 4b1 and 6w1 are marked in this way. In the south arcade, a block cut by 3n1 also has such a circle. (Although both the circle and the mark have been “embellished” later, they are the correct dimensions.) It seems possible that the circles are a checker's mark, drawn by the only pair of compasses on the site. Another circle appears high up on another south arcade pillar, but no other mark is visible. If the “quality control” theory is correct, either this block was 3n1's second “test piece” - and by

process of elimination 5b1 was the checker - or it was cut by 5b1 or 7t1 (both lightly scribed marks easily eroded) and these three only had one block each checked.

Specialisation within the arcades

While 4b1 produced blocks for all three pillars in each arcade, 3n1 (on the south side) and 2t1 (on the north side) turned out blocks for the pillars and responds for one side only, producing only one each for the opposite side. Of the sixteen half-blocks that originally constituted the moulded bases of the pillars and responds, identifying marks can still be seen on only seven (following clumsy nineteenth century hacking to cram in more pews). However, five of these were carved by 6w1 and the other two were both the work of 2t1, which perhaps suggests that they worked on the bulk of these bases. Also, while 4b1 produced only one block for the four responds, he was responsible for the entirety of the “trim” of quadrant-edged ashlar blocks that runs beside three of them.

Subsequent specialisation in other places

Some of the original five were involved in dressing the stone for the arches of the arcade and the ashlar of the higher interior walls, the north aisle windows, the rood loft stair, the beginning of the heightening of the tower and the north porch. They were joined by one or other of the new recruits in the last three of these operations.

The only visible marks on the north aisle windows and string course belong to 4b1 and 3n1. A stone near the aisle's eastern end, with the outline of a coat of arms in relief, also carries 3n1's mark. Nearby is the rood loft staircase. These two masons, together with 5b1, worked on its newels and curved ashlar and were joined by 7t1, seemingly a new recruit. (He only contributed the top block of the easternmost pillar of the south aisle to the arcades.) This suggests that all this work was contemporaneous.

Ashlar blocks for the porch on this side were cut by 5b1 and 2t1, but they also were joined by a new mason, 9r1, as well as by the only mason whose mark is visible on the south aisle windows, 3v1. Again, the implication is that these parts were being built simultaneously.

The marks of 4b1 and 6w1 appear at higher levels. 4b1 is on one block of moulding in the fourth bay of the north arcade and they also appear together on an ashlar above the chancel arch. 6w1 also appears amongst stones dressed by a new recruit, 6x1, in the tower near the current ringing chamber door from where the tower stair was being extended. Workmen also reported 6x1 high within the tower on an ashlar at the level of the springers for the uncompleted vault.

The order of rebuilding


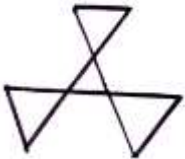








If the circles that appear mostly in the north arcade are indeed “quality control” marks this would suggest that they are on blocks cut early in the process and that the rebuilding began here. Also, the topmost and least noticeable course of the westernmost pillar in the south arcade is actually made up from two half-blocks like those in the responds. This could indicate that all four responds were completed by the time this pillar was finished. The

topmost block of the easternmost pillar in that arcade was cut by 7t1, who went on to work on the rood loft stair (a later feature) which suggests that he started work just as the south aisle was being completed - at this south east corner.

Both the north porch and the rood loft stair necessarily have to be later additions.

In the following diagram all the marks are to scale though not necessarily with each other. They were produced from rubbings, which were traced, scanned and reduced.

St Mary's, Tickhill: Masons' Marks on Fourteenth/Fifteenth Century Stonework

The Original Team?		The New Recruits?	
	4b1		6x1
	3n1		3v1
	2t1		9r1
	5b1		7t1
	6w1		Quality Control? 1o1

An explanation of the recording of the marks

Marks and their locations have been recorded using the method suggested in Barnwell and Pacey's book, *Who Built Beverley Minster?* (Spire Books, 2008). Each different mark is identified by the number of strokes needed to cut it, combined with the alphabet letter it resembles in shape and followed by a number to make each mark unique.

I am very much in debt to a number of people for the opportunity to report these early findings, particularly to the current Churchwardens (John Marsden, Eluned Foulds and Stuart Millard) who have met me on site and lent me keys at what must often have been inconvenient times, and to workmen employed by Bridgetts, who did some "mark spotting" while inspecting and cleaning the upper stonework.