

St John the Baptist church

New Alresford

Historical graffiti survey report



Date of survey: 29th November 2024

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Post code: S024 9AG Grid Ref: SU583326 Church Heritage Record No: 641003

Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project

<http://www.hantsfieldclub.org.uk/medieval-graffiti/index.html>

St John the Baptist church, New Alresford: a brief description

The church is Grade II* listed. It has a nave and aisle of 4 bays, and a chancel with north and south chapels. It is built of flint with stone dressings. There is a modern extension. Most of the church was destroyed in the town fire of 1689, and the current structure mainly dates to the late 19th century rebuild and restoration. There are some traces of earlier medieval features, including a 13th century lancet window at the west end of the south aisle, and two medieval doorways on the north and side sides. The tower has 3 stages, the 2 lower are 14th century with flint and stone rubble walling and stone dressings, and the upper is 17th century, probably 1694, of red brickwork. There is a large clock dial of 1811 facing the town. Above the west doorway is a re-set stone sculpture of the crucifixion, possibly 13th century or earlier in date.

Graffiti survey methodology

The survey group consisted of volunteers from the Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project. The team first scanned the building to locate the graffiti, using a raking light source in the interior, and ambient daylight on the exterior. Each mark or set of marks was photographed with a digital camera or iPad. Sometimes multiple images were taken using different angles of light source. The location and type of graffiti were recorded on record sheets. Images were later transferred to a computer where further enhanced identifications were made, and this detail was collated with the original field data. As well as graffiti, construction and other “unofficial” marks were recorded.

Graffiti summary and discussion

The tower



Fig 1 Ringing chamber. North window, west jamb. Intersecting circles

The main piece of graffiti found in the tower was on the west jamb of the north window in the ringing chamber. This consisted of at least five intersecting compass-drawn circles, now almost obscured by many layers of paint and limewash (Fig 1). Such compass-drawn marks are thought to have had a protective, or apotropaic function, to prevent

the ingress of evil spirits, and are often found on building openings such as fireplaces, doors and, like here, windows.



Fig 2. Carpenters' marks on post and braces in NE corner

Although not graffiti as such, the survey also recorded the fine examples of carpenters' marks which are on the exposed main timbers in the ringing chamber. Timber buildings were first constructed off site, in a framing yard where the carpenters could assemble the wall-frames and roof trusses by laying them out flat on the ground and pegging them together temporarily. Then they would mark up and number the frames and trusses before dismantling them for transport to the construction site. The numbers ensured that the right tenons went into the right mortises for an accurate fit. They were always positioned next to a joint with the same number in Roman numerals marking both joining timbers. The marks used on the joints between the upright posts and the braces in each corner of the chamber are of 3 and 4 lines. Four is

always denoted by IIII to avoid any confusion with six, VI. The structure in the NE corner has marks on all 4 surfaces. (Fig 2) Sometimes, as here in the chamber, one side of the building will have a plain set of numbers while the matching ones on the other side will be distinguished by an extra diagonal line to avoid any confusion. Here, the braces in the SE and SW corners have an extra line or "tag" added, giving the end mark the appearance of a Y (Fig 3).



Fig 3. Carpenters' marks, one with additional tag in SW corner

In addition to these marks are some more unusual marks. In each corner, on the surface of the upright post which faces into the chamber, is a mark consisting of 3

intersecting lines, forming a flattened cross shape (Fig 4).



Fig 4. Incised mark on post in NE corner, facing into chamber

These marks are not associated with a joint, and their function is uncertain, but their symmetry and similar appearance on each corner post suggests that they were made at the same time and with a specific purpose. It is therefore possible that they are apotropaic and were perhaps made soon after the timber structure was built, with the memory of the recent catastrophic fires still fresh and were an attempt to seek protection against similar disastrous occurrences to the church.

In the upper bell chamber the only graffiti noted was on the wooden clock case, including pencil-written instructions for the working of the clock. There is one name G W(?) dated 1915 (Fig 5).

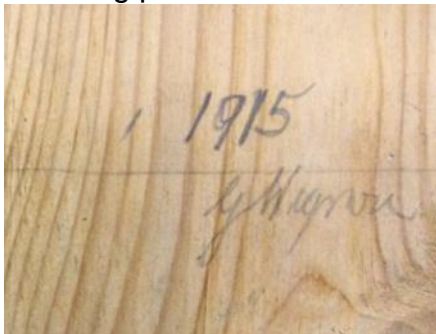


Fig 5. Bell chamber. Clock case. Signature dated 1915

Also of interest are the instructions to use pennies on the pendulum to slow down and speed up the clock, (Fig 6). This use of old pennies continues and the best-known parallel is the Great Clock associated with Big Ben at the Palace of Westminster. There, pre-decimal pennies are used to regulate the clock mechanism, and adding one

penny causes the clock to gain two-fifths of a second in 24 hours.



Fig 6. Bell chamber, Clock case. Pennies ON for faster, OFF for slower

Some wooden panels from an earlier clock case have been preserved, because they record the recruitment of “eight young ringers to fill up the gaps left by those who joined the colours in the great war against Germany in 1914”. Their first peal was rung on Feb 8th, 1916 (Fig 7).

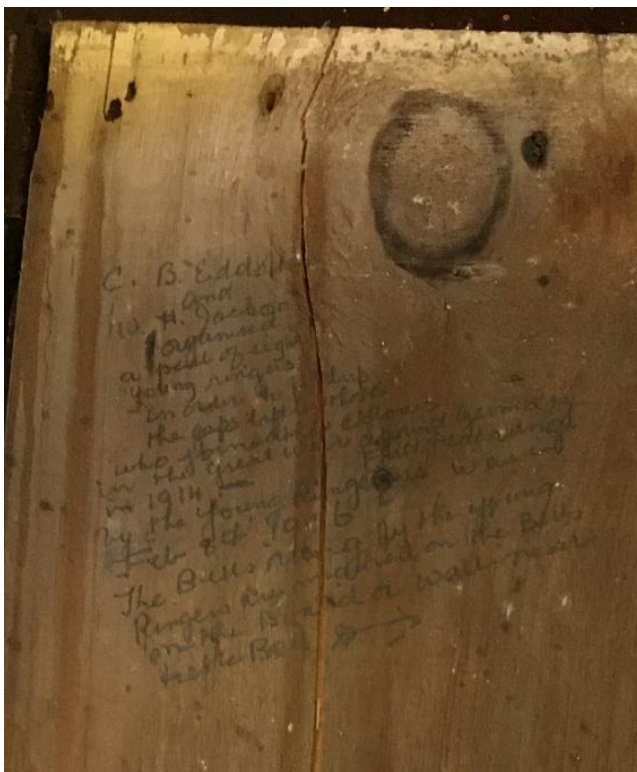


Fig 7. Old clock case with record of new ringers recruited in the First World War

At the side of the step ladder leading up to the ringing chamber from the ground floor is some graffiti in the window jamb, which appears to be a piece of text. However, it is very faint, covered in layers of limewash, so cannot be deciphered.

The church interior

There is only one area within the main body of the church where historical graffiti was found. This is on the north side of the entrance archway into the nave from the

tower (Fig 8). The pilaster here has pairs of initials, crosses and the date 1708 incised into it. The form of lettering of the initials is typical of 18th century, for example W is shown as intersecting Vs. These pairs of initials include IW, IM, WN, CL and TA (Fig 9). The form of the number eight in the date 1708 is also of interest, being an English variant of the numeral, with a flattened horizontal top (Fig 10).

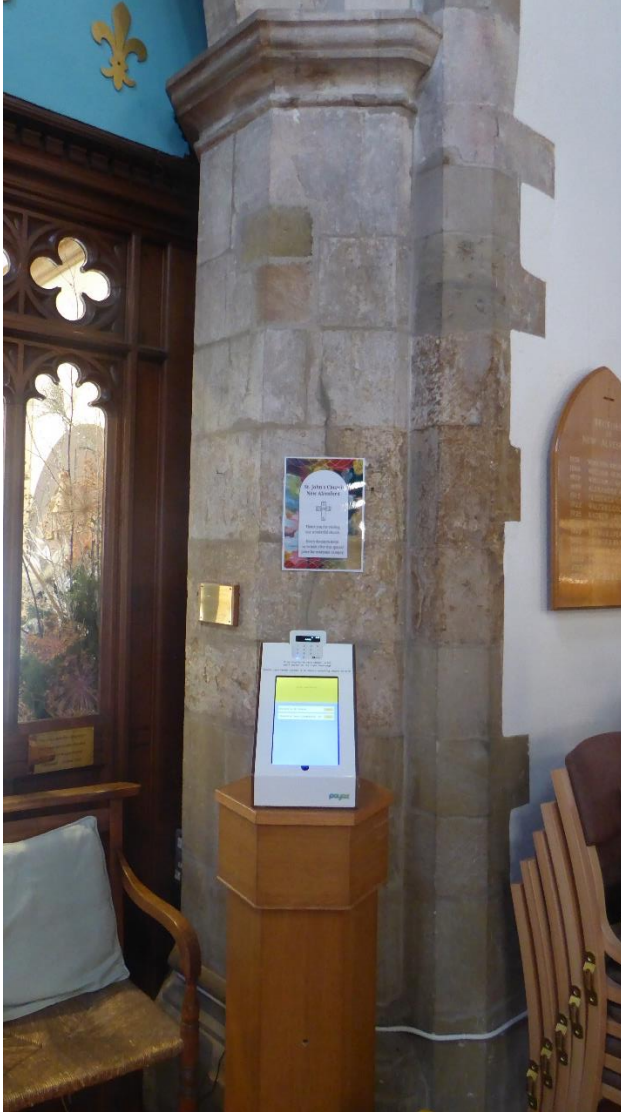


Fig 8. North Pilaster at entrance to nave



Fig 9. West face of pilaster, Initials including IW, TA and WN



Fig 10. West face of pilaster. Initials and 1708

More recent graffiti occurs around the organ, at the east end of the nave, in the south

aisle. There is a some on the re-located panelling on the south wall of the passage leading to the old vestry. The graffiti has been scratched into the top of this panelling, so was obviously made when the panelling was in this position as it would have been too high to reach in its original location. The most legible of this graffiti reads "R Boswell loves Kathleen Cook" (Fig 11).



Fig 11. Modern graffiti on south aisle panelling.

There is more graffiti scratched into the wooden organ casing, but access to this area was hampered by items stored in front of it. Some initials, eg AHH and TH, and

roughly- drawn circles and other shapes could be made out.

This graffiti may well have been made by those tasked with pumping the organ before electricity was introduced and is a common find in many English churches.

There is a group of deeply carved graffiti on the wall to the north of the old vestry, partly obscured by pipework. This consists of initials DB and BM on each side of an unidentifiable shape (Fig 12). There are also abraded names written in pencil and blue ink, and part of a date, 1921.



Fig 12. Wall to north of old vestry. Initials and shape

The church exterior



Fig 13. North doorway

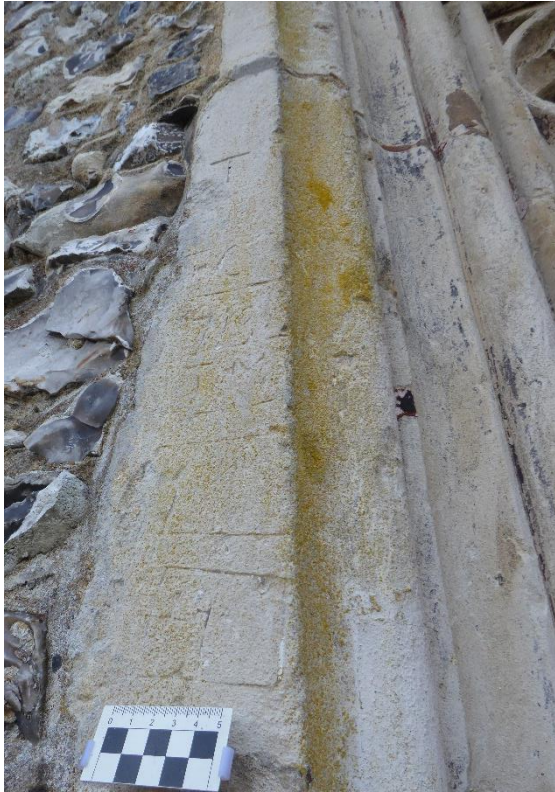


Fig 14. East side of north doorway. Boxed initials and date 1713

There is an interesting group of graffiti around the exterior of the blocked north doorway in the north aisle (Fig 13). This consists of dates, which are all from the early 18th century, and sets of initials, some boxed (Figs 14 and 15).



Fig 15. East side of north doorway. CL 1702



Fig 16. East jamb of north doorway. WI and cross

The weathering of the stone means that sometimes only the incised outline of the box remains, the initials inside having worn away. On the west side of the door is a

more elaborate box shape, containing the (very worn) initials WH, with a triangular roof-like top surmounted by a cross (Fig 17). Such forms are well known in Hampshire churches, and there is a good parallel at Romsey Abbey. It is thought that some of these more elaborate sets of initials may represent memorials to people who could not afford an expensive monument or tomb within the church, (Champion, 2018). The graffiti around the doorway also includes crosses, left as symbols of personal devotion (Fig 16).



Fig 17. West jamb of north doorway. Elaborate boxed initials

There are some more modern scratched initials on the stonework of the blocked lower section of the east window and on the SE buttress of the chancel.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go to Penny Forbes for organizing our visit, and apologies to all the church members we disrupted while they were preparing the church for the Angel Festival. I am grateful to Tony Stirling for confirming the continued use of pennies for altering the tower clock. Special thanks to Elizabeth Johnson who took us up into the tower and provided us with valuable information about the history of the church and the bells and showed us the First World War graffiti about the bell ringers.

References

Bullen, Michael, Crook, John, Hubbock, Rodney, and Pevsner, Nikolaus (2010) **The Buildings of England. Hampshire: Winchester and the North.**

Champion, Matthew J, (2018) “**Memory made solid: informal church monuments and graffiti**”, Journal of the Church Monuments Society, Vol XXXIII

Roberts, Edward (2010) **Hampshire Houses 1250 – 1700: Their dating and development**

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1156507>

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/building/palace/big-ben/facts-figures/great-clock-facts/>

Survey archive

97 photographs were taken during the survey. All images and record sheets are held by the Hampshire Field Club Medieval Graffiti Project archive and are available on request. A copy of this report has been lodged with the Hampshire Historic Environment Record and with the church, and the report has been posted on the HFC website www.hantsfieldclub.org.uk.

Disclaimer

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Karen Wardley

HMGP Co-ordinator

December 2024



St. John the Baptist Church
West Street, New Alresford
Plan of Ringing chamber
29 November 2024
P= post W = window
X = cross-shaped marks

