St Mary's church, Greywell

Historical graffiti survey report



Dates of survey: 29th June and 20th August 2026

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Post code: RG29 Grid Ref: SU 718 509 Church Heritage Record No: 641116

Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project

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

St Mary's church, Greywell: a brief description

The church is Grade II* listed. It consists of a nave and chancel with a low west tower and north porch. Bullen dates the nave with its fine dogtooth north doorway, the chancel arch and the tower arch to c1200. The tower has been much repaired, both in the 17th and 19th centuries, with the addition of substantial brick buttresses. Unusual features include the survival of the wooden rood screen of c1500 and the contemporary semicircular projection of flint and stone chequer work on the north side of the building which houses the rood staircase (Fig 1).



Fig 1. North side of church. Projection housing rood staircase

Graffiti survey methodology

The survey group consisted of volunteers from the Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project. Two survey visits were made, the first as a scoping exercise to identify the main areas of graffiti. The team 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. 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

Porch and doorway



Fig 2. The north doorway

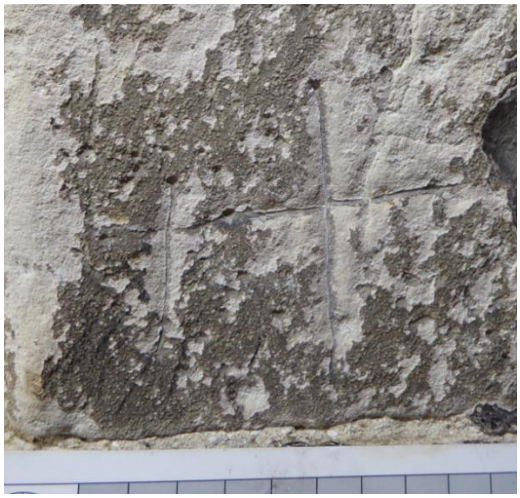
The graffiti around the north doorway (Fig 2) is striking and is mentioned by Willoughby (1996) and the church guide:

The fine Norman doorway … is surrounded by a dozen or more curious carvings of crosses similar to those which are to be found in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

These are probably the signatures of Greywell men who had fought, or were intending to fight, the Crusade in the Holy Land, perhaps in the armies of Richard the Lionheart or of Edward I. (Willoughby, 1996).

The explanation that crosses carved around church doorways were made by Crusaders is a common one and found in many church guidebooks. While there may be an element of truth in this, we wonder how many Crusaders were living locally. It is now thought more likely that the crosses were made by local worshippers as an act of personal devotion when entering the sacred space, and by pilgrims, en route to English shrines such as Winchester. The tradition of pilgrims leaving their mark continues informally today, although books with inked stamps are preferred as mementos and proof of participation rather than encouragement to create new graffiti.

The crosses seem to fall into two categories. There are the older crosses, which are the ones Willloughby refers to, which are finely carved and have circular indentations at the terminals. These are known as a “budded cross” or “cross pommée” (Figs 3 & 4).





Figs 3. & 4.” Budded crosses” on east side of doorway



One of the crosses has additional lines connecting its lower terminals (Fig 5), although the significance of this is unknown.

The crosses appear singly and in groups, often on the chamfered edges and jambs of the doorway arch (Fig 6).

Fig 5. Budded cross with connecting lines.
West side of inner doorway arch



Fig 6. East side of doorway. Group of crosses on two blocks of the chamfer and jamb



However, demonstrating that “graffiti attracts graffiti”, there are also many later crosses, often crudely executed as fine scratches, and of varying sizes and shapes (Fig 7). These are more common on the flat outer surfaces of the arch.

Fig 7. Later scratched crosses on west side of doorway



Another sign of devotion is the VV mark (Fig 8) carved into the west jamb of the doorway. These marks were originally symbols dedicated to the Virgin Mary, standing for *Virgo Virginum*, Virgin of the Virgins. In post-Reformation times their religious symbolism was lost and they became purely protective or apotropaic. They are often found in domestic buildings, around openings where evil spirits might enter. In this case, as the symbol has been carved into a doorway perhaps it served as both.

Fig 8. VV mark on west jamb of doorway

There is an 8-armed cross or star shape, possibly a baptismal cross, carved into the inside wall, east of the doorway (Fig 9).



Fig 9. Inside wall, east of doorway. 8-armed cross



Initials are carved into the east jamb of the doorway but are very weathered. The clearest are IS (Fig 10). The form of the initial I, with a central bar, suggests a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century date. It could also represent the initial J.

Fig 10. East jamb of doorway. Initials IS

At the top of the archway, on the west side, is an upward pointing arrow shape (Fig 11). This could have been made by a mason to aid the construction of the arch. It is interesting that similar arrow shapes are found on the stone blocks on the east and west sides of the entrance doorway to nearby St Andrew's church, South Warnborough (Fig 12). Both church doorways are Norman in date and although it might be stretching possibility to suggest that the same masons were involved, it does seem that similar techniques were being used.

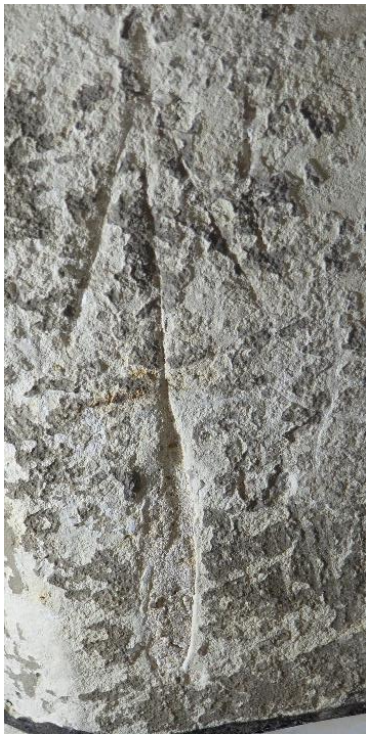


Fig 11. West side of door arch. Arrow shape

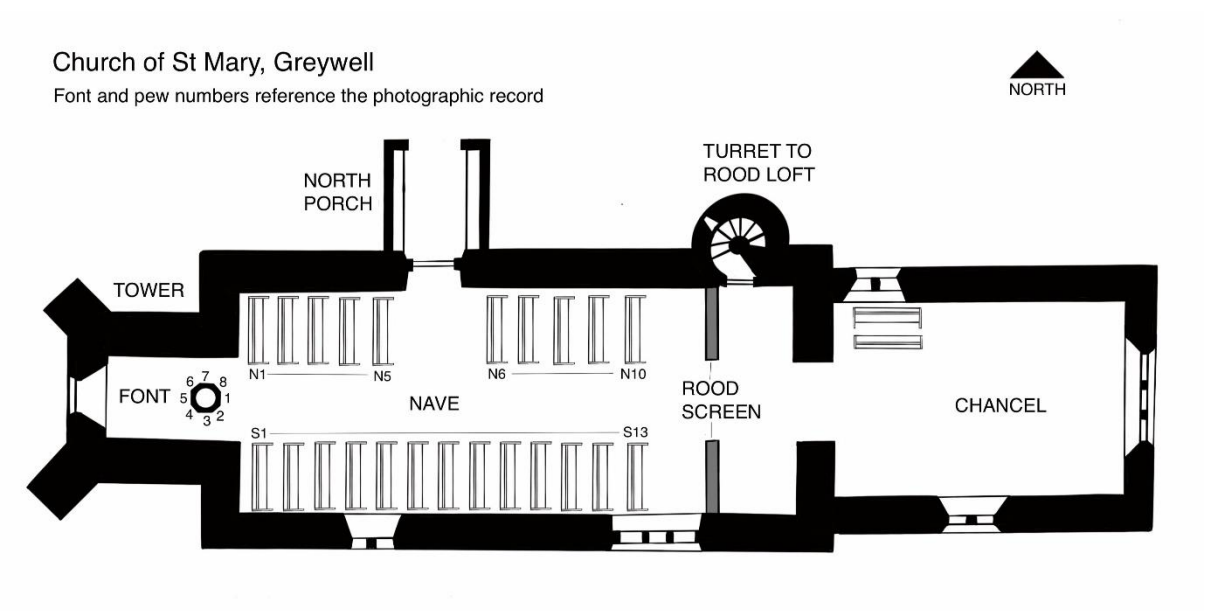


Fig 12. South Warnborough church doorway. Arrow shape

The church interior



Church Plan



The nave

On a glass pane on the west side of the south window opposite the north entrance door is engraved what seems to be an elaborate cursive initial E (Fig 13).



Fig 13. Nave, south window pane. Engraved letter E

The significance of this mark is unknown. Glaziers would have had the right sort of tool, ie a steel engraver, to produce such a mark, and we sometimes find glaziers' names on glass panes although these were usually written in full and include the date of their work. Perhaps an enterprising visitor made this mark?

The wooden pews in the nave also carry graffiti, some of it dated to the late nineteenth century – see later section on **pews**.

The font

The octagonal font (Fig 14) is situated at the west end of the nave. It is dated to around 1500 and has decorative quatrefoils on each face and a substantial lead lining (Fig 15). There are many accidental scratches on the outside but there is a large deliberate X superimposed on the shield on the south-facing side (Fig 16).





Figs 14. & 15. West end of nave. Octagonal font with lead lining



Fig 17. Font, south face. Large X incised into shield

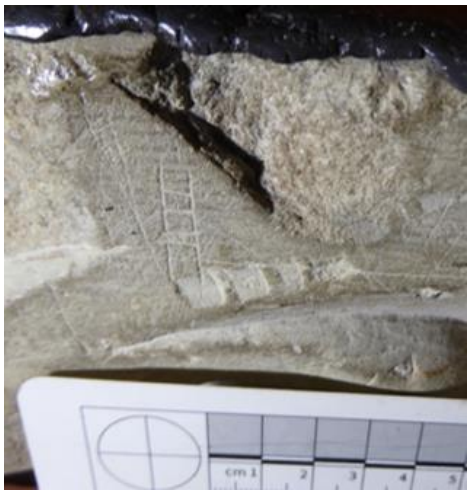


Fig 18. Font, southwest face. Ladder shape

On the south-west-facing side, above the quatrefoil, is a ladder shape (Fig 18). This could possibly be a representation of “Jacob’s Ladder”, which in Christian iconography symbolises the soul’s ascent to heaven.

There are some striking graffiti initials incised into the lead lining on the flat surface at the top of the basin. They are in the form of “wriggle work”, a chiselled technique commonly found as decoration on pewter vessels in the 17th and 18th century, which, along with the style of the lettering, suggests this is when this graffiti was made. The initials IM are repeated (Fig 19) on the northeast face, and there is a group of initials consisting of IM, T, a backwards N and IN on the northwest face (Fig 20).



Fig 19. Font, lead lining, northeast face. Repeated initials IM



Fig 20. Font, lead lining, northwest face. Group of "wriggle work" initials

The rood screen



Fig 21. The rood screen

The fine wooden rood screen at St Mary's is a very rare survival in Hampshire, although there is another example at nearby South Warnborough church. It is dated to c1500 so does not predate the Reformation, when most of these screens were destroyed, by very long. The rood loft was reached by a rood stair, housed in the semi-circular projection on the north side of the nave (see Fig 1).



There is a small amount of relatively modern graffiti scratched into the rood screen. On the south side along the lower rail are single and pairs of initials, including AB, ER, FS, and the name Christopher. On the north side, on the end post is a finely carved initial T (Fig 22).

Fig 22. Rood screen, north side, end post. Initial T

The rood staircase

The rood staircase is entered through a small wooden door on the north side of the nave. The only graffiti found is on the plastered walls. There is a vertical line crossed by three horizontal lines, which might be a capital I. Next to it is a fainter P, so these could represent the initials IP (Fig 22). On the nave side of the doorway into the staircase is a small saltire cross or X shape (Fig 23).

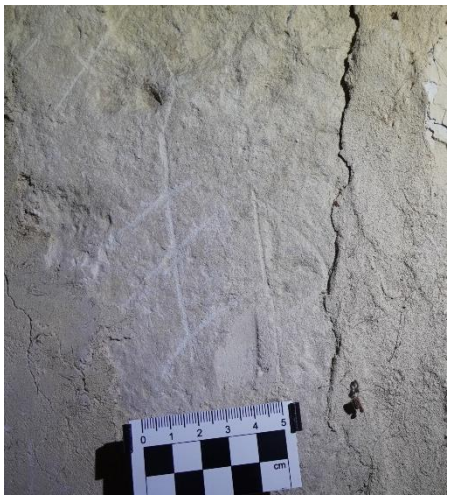




Fig 22. Rood staircase wall. Possible initials IP

Fig 23. Rood staircase doorwayl. X shape or saltire cross

The tower

No graffiti was seen on the ground floor of the tower. Photographs were taken higher up inside the tower, but no graffiti could be seen here either.

The chancel

There is graffiti on the lime washed east-facing wall, north of the chancel arch (Fig 24).



Fig 24. Chancel, east-facing wall north of chancel arch

This includes a budded cross (with circular indentations at the terminals) (Fig 25), similar in style to the crosses around the entrance door. The initials DI beneath are less distinct and may not be contemporary. There are more incised initials, including AB with a date of either 1936 or 1986 next to it (Fig 26). AB was a prolific graffiti maker and the same initials occur several times on the pews in the nave (Figs 28 - 30), and on the roodscreen rail.

Other paired initials on this wall include WI and WC.



Fig 25. Chancel wall, north of chancel arch, budded cross



Fig 26. Chancel wall, north of chancel arch. Initials AB and date 1936 or 1986

The pews

Graffiti is found on the woodwork of the pews in the choir and in the nave. There is more graffiti on the older pews in the nave, the earliest date noted is 1895.

The **nave pews** (Fig 27) were numbered from the rear (west) end of the nave, with a suffix denoting North or South side, see Church Plan. The graffiti here mainly consists of names and initials, some dated, although many are faded or overwritten and hard to decipher. Most are incised, probably with pocket knives, and some are in ink or pencil.



Fig 27. The nave pews

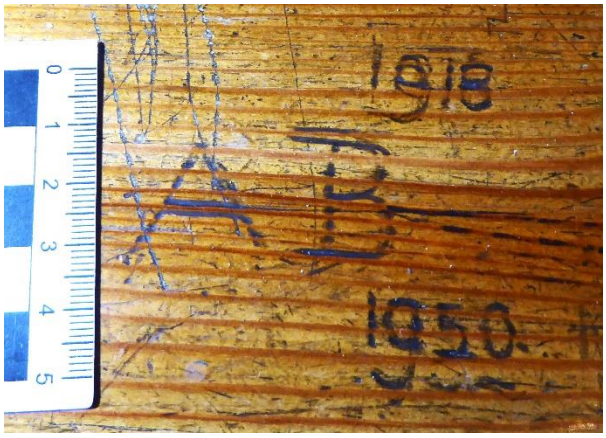


Fig 28. Pew N2 bookshelf. AB 1918 1950
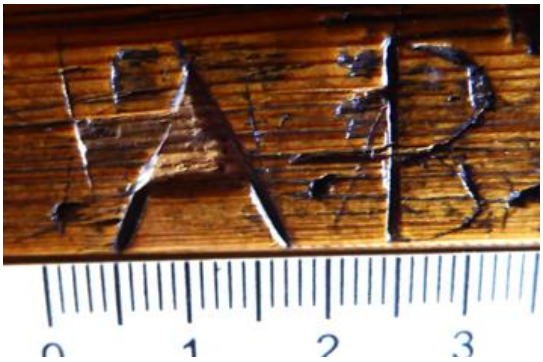


Fig 29. Pew S6 bookshelf edge. AB

AB's initials occur in several places (see also Fig 26), for example on the bookshelf of pew N2 adjacent to the dates 1918 and 1950 (Fig 28), on pew S6 on the bookshelf edge (Fig 29) and on the bookshelf of N5 (Fig 30).



Fig 30. Pew N5 bookshelf. Edgar Grigg 1911. Other initials include AB.

Edgar Grigg's name and initials occur a few times. The example on the bookshelf of pew N5 is dated 1911 (Fig 30). He is probably related to Jethro Grigg, d.1929, who is recorded on a brass plaque on the choir stalls.

Other names found on the same bookshelf include C. Rolfe, W. Dicker, B. Lidbetter and V. Hedges. The latter two are both dated 12/9/43 (Fig 31).



Fig 31. Pew N5 bookshelf. W Hedges and B Lidbetter both dated 12/9/43

The church exterior

Very little graffiti was found on the exterior of the church. The Victorian restoration removed many of the original surfaces, and the church guidebook notes the loss of church wardens' initials, dated 1663, on the previously plastered north wall.

An initial W is scratched into the northwest brick buttress of the tower (Figs 32 & 33) and on the east jamb of the blocked south doorway (Fig 34) is another initial W (Fig 35).



Fig 32. Church tower with buttresses



Fig 33. Tower northwest buttress. Initial W



Fig 34. Nave exterior, south wall. Blocked doorway



Fig 35. Nave exterior, south doorway, east jamb. Initial W

There is an Ordnance Survey benchmark scratched onto a block of stone on the northwest corner of the nave (Fig 36). This location is marked on the 1872 Six-inch Ordnance Survey map (Fig 37).



Fig 36. Ordnance Survey benchmark. Northwest corner of nave

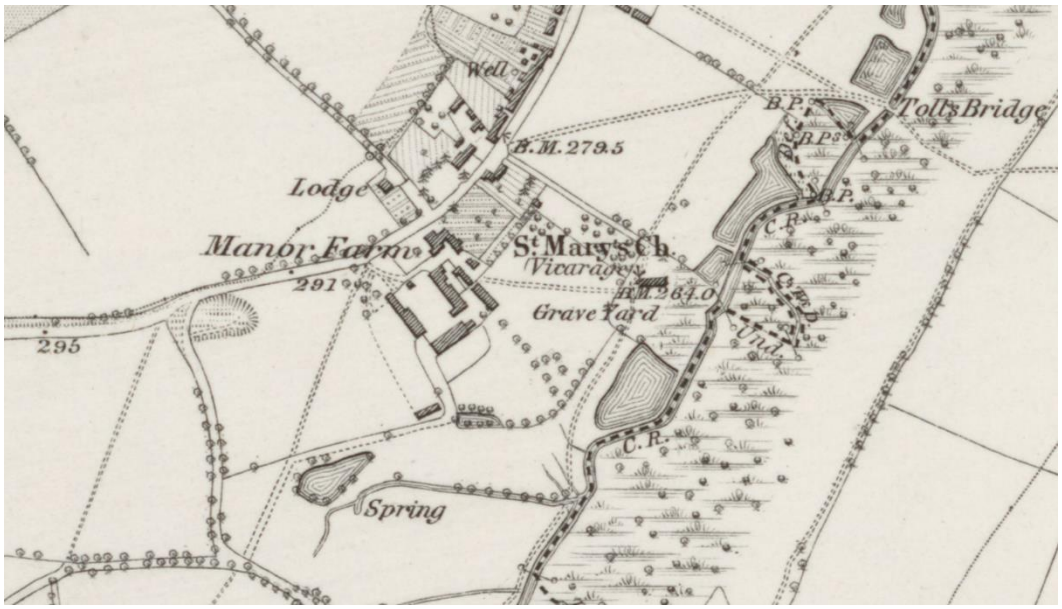


Fig 37. Location of Ordnance Survey benchmark shown on six-inch map of 1872

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to Libbie Bromfield, Church Warden, who opened up the rood loft stair for us, kindly provided very welcome refreshments and organised access to other essential facilities provided by a kind neighbour. Libbie also did a grand job in publicising our visit, and it was a real pleasure to meet the villagers (and their dogs) who came to meet us and find out about our survey.

We also extend thanks to Mark Bromfield, who went up into the tower space and took some splendid photographs for us so that we didn't have to.

References

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

Willoughby, Rupert **Greywell Church and Village** undated guidebook

Willoughby, Rupert (1996) **St Mary Greywell. An architectural note**

Survey archive

212 photographs were taken during the surveys. 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 posted on the HFC website.

Disclaimer

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Karen Wardley

HMGP Co-ordinator

September 2026