

Mysterious Discoveries
at
St Mary and All Saints Church,
Hampton Lovett



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Come and explore inscriptions; Marian marks, spirit traps, Chi-Ro, bell ringing notation, a heater shield, mason marks, initials, a scratch dial, holy dust scrapings and possibly more!

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Following the success of the renovation and opening of the Tower in 2024, much was discovered and some of it still remains a mystery. This includes intriguing incised graffiti marks.

So far, we have discovered a number of marks in the tower, but also on the outer walls of the church. Let's start with the tower.

On the weekend of its opening, a discovery was made in this room; a room whose exact use is not known but thought to be where the vestments and sacramental vessels were kept and so currently regarded as, "The Priest's Room".

One visitor's eyes were drawn to the south side window (the one on the right) and this is what she saw.



Just to the left hand side or East reveal of the south facing window are marks resembling E W.

It's entirely possible that someone incised their initials into the stonework but given what we know about protective markings and their placement right by the window, it's unlikely.

People only started to leave their names and initials in church stone and wood after the Reformation. Before that, most graffiti are 'apotropaic' or symbolic.



Simply, they are markings to bring good fortune and/or ward off bad luck or the 'evil eye'. They also have a more complex meaning and may be offering protection to particular objects or an individual from a specific threat or threats. It would make sense that we find them by the window. Ritual marks may serve as spiritual barriers to guard thresholds.

The E is ambiguous. E for Episcopus or Ecclesia? Maybe. Three prongs to represent the trinity? Perhaps. A trident-like form symbolising defence against evil? Arguably more likely as it's next to the W.

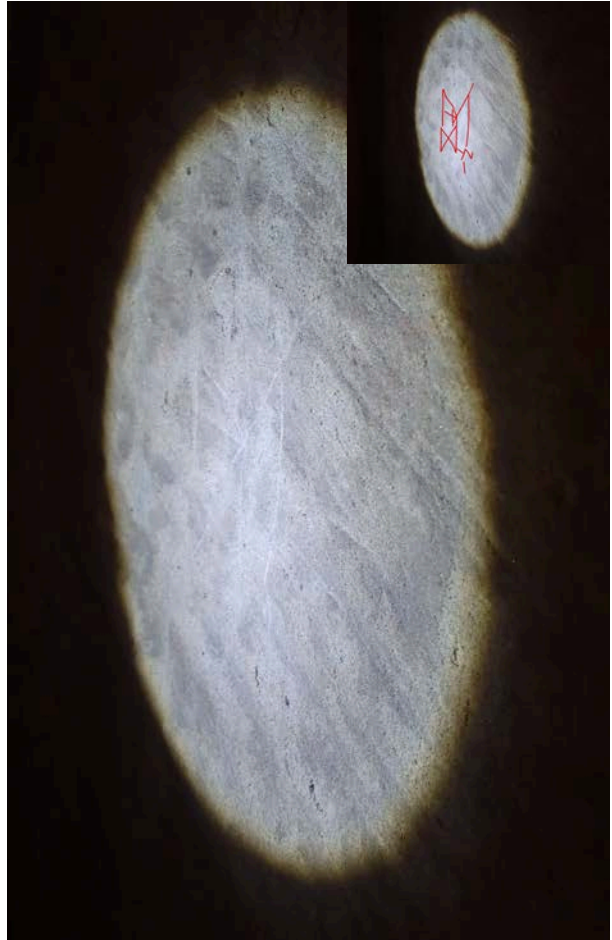
Why do we also think that this E W is more likely to be a protective mark? On revisiting the room, this was found on the right hand side or West reveal of the same south facing window.

There is a conjoined VV forming a W shape. This and possibly the W on the East reveal side are *Marian marks*. These are common in English churches and invoke the Virgin Mary.

And just above it, is what looks like an (attempted?) *IXI* in a 'mesh' design. A mesh design is a 'spirit trap'.



Another *IXI mesh* is perhaps easier to see on the East window (the one on the left hand side of the first photo), south reveal or left hand side.



There are more intriguing marks as you head up the tower.

In the Bell stage, west, north of the window opening, there is a 'P', almost in the form of *Pax* or *Chi-Rho* ☩. This may actually be quite modern but is a lovely find nonetheless.

As ever with these markings, it is conjecture or an educated guess. But that is part of their mystery and charm.



When we look across to the Bell stage south, west reveal, we see a single, roughly squared stone with numerous incised markings. Someone or a number of people have been busy here.

There are so many incised lines here, no red line guide is provided in case you see something we do not!



Are these old inscriptions? How old? Are they post reformation initials? More that is lost to time, no longer in living memory.

And what of these markings in the Bellstage north opening, west reveal?



They appear remarkably similar to place notation on 4 bells. Whilst we have 3 bells in the tower, there may have been a fourth at one point. It's reasonable to consider that bell ringers may have taken to marking the wall, perhaps as a reminder of their change ringing system or simply another way of saying, 'we were here and this is what we do'.

And, over the entrance way to the bell stage, we find another small example of a W.



There may be more yet to discover in the tower. Let's now head back down to ground level and look at some lovely findings on the outer walls.

Just over the outside entrance to the Tower, there is a faint incision of what may be a "heater" shield with a cross upon it. This is another possible apotropaic mark providing protection

against evil and such marks are often found near doorways as well as windows.

The Tower appears well protected!

You might also see the mark that looks like a capital I or T. It looks like it could be a Stonemason's mark. But it's in an odd place on the stone as if the stone has been cut close to the mark. There is a chance that stones were repurposed as there was building work in the 14th and 15th centuries on the church. It could have been somewhere else entirely to begin with.



As you face the Tower door and then look to your left, another mark also looks like it belonged to a stonemason. This time, it resembles a K. Mason's marks do not have to look like letters but these are often easy to carve, to see and to remember.



We also find that JH left his (or her?!) mark just to the left of the Tower door as you face it. It's much more likely to have been made closer to the modern day. Post-reformation, the graffiti became more 'I was here' with initials, names and dates, whereas pre-Reformation graffiti reflects lower literacy rates and is usually a more protective and/or illustrative incision.



You might also notice holes on each side of the letters J and H. This could be a stylistic choice of our graffiti carver. Yet there are also holes further around the corner on the outer wall of the west facing back of the Nave.



Sometimes, such holes are a reflection of a stone's wear and tear and weathering. However, these appear purposefully made. And this is where we return to possible apotropaic markings. These are not exactly 'inscriptions' but visitors to the church may have used sticks or knives to gather stone dust, deemed holy, for apotropaic protection, healing, fertility, plaster for icons and burial practices.

It is thought that the gathering of dust, earth and stone scrapings from mediaeval structures were mixed with holy water or wine and consumed as a curative potion. Bede even describes the removal of stone dust by pilgrims from the place where Saint Oswald died.

The markings here at Hampton may actually be the result of long-forgotten folk medicine going back centuries.

As we head back around the church entrance to the south side of the chancel, we can see a 'mass', 'scratch' or 'tide' dial. Some regard this as a type of medieval sundial, typically found on the south wall of churches, used to mark the time for religious services like Mass.



The gnomon would sit where the hole is and project at a right angle to cast the sun's shadow. A series of scratched or carved lines radiate from the centre point, which the shadow traverses.

Others have questioned the practicality of this.

Who would leave their

home to check the sundial on the side of the church? Before people had clocks, most would know the service was about to start when they heard the bells ringing and from their regular, well established routines.

Maybe, it was simply a very crude way to help the parish priest have a general idea of the time of day as his parishioners would not have to attend all the offices.

Given that some of these dials have been found on non-south facing walls and on non-religious buildings, their precise purpose remains an enigma. Nonetheless, we have a beautiful example of one here.

So there we have it. Marian marks, spirit traps, Chi-Ro, bell ringing notation, a heater shield, mason marks, initials, a scratch dial and holy dust scrapings. For centuries, people who worked at and attended Hampton Lovett church knew what these meant, their purpose and what motivated them to incise these markings. Many details are lost to time. But the Christians who went before us have left their mark.

If you find anymore, please do tell us!