MEDIEVAL GRAFFITI IN SOME BUCKINGHAMSHIRE CHURCHES

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From earliest times Man seems to have been impelled by an urge to leave his mark on any surface suitable for his purpose. One wit summed up this compulsion when, among the thousands of graffiti on the walls of Pompeii, he wrote: "Everyone writes on walls — except me".

It is not surprising that in medieval times church buildings should have been likely places for the graffiti writers, artists or doodlers. The church was not only a centre for worship but a social meeting place, a school, and sometimes a fortress and a court of justice. All sorts and conditions of people passed through its doors so where better, in times when paper was a rarity, to leave some record of their thoughts and feelings, or merely to indulge their fancies and humour by harmless drawings and writings?

My wife and I first became interested in graffiti a few years ago through a chance visit to a church in Cambridgeshire which had a fascinating variety of graffiti on its walls and piers. Since then, we have visited over 1,300 churches and 35 cathedrals and abbeys all over England. We soon discovered that by far the greater number of significant graffiti are to be found in churches built before the 16th century and especially in areas where clunch stone was used. Clunch is a smooth, soft type of limestone widely used for the interiors of churches in Beds., Cambs., Herts., Essex and to a lesser extent, in parts of Bucks. and counties to the south. The smoothness of this stone was ideal for the graffiti writer whose 'tools' probably consisted of little more than a pin, sharp nail, knife stylus or masons' compass.

Elsewhere in England, and particularly to the north of a line from the Wash to the Severn or to the west of Wiltshire and Dorset the nature of most of the building stone makes the task of the graffiti-searcher rather unrewarding.

The diversity of the graffiti may help to identify their probable authors. There are abbreviated prayers on a wall near the priest's seat, perhaps to prompt his memory. Or there are inscriptions in Latin or English; sometimes a pitiful cry for help; sometimes the recording of some unusual local event. There are caricatures of men and beasts or beautifully drawn figures. Many of these closely resemble those in medieval illuminated psalters and Books of Hours and it is reasonable to assume that some would have been executed by monks or artists familiar with such books. Many drawings of people, boats and weapons have been dated as being of medieval origin but in cases of heraldic or religious emblems it is sometimes impossible to fix a precise date as to when they were inscribed and by whom. What is beyond doubt is that many graffiti were the handiwork of priests, monks, teachers and artists. Others, such as accounts of building costs, sketch plans of windows and arches, and intricate patterns based on the circle were probably the work of master masons or others involved in building and restoration activities.

Of the graffiti we have been able to date with certainty as being post-1600, the great majority consist of initials, dates and crude designs of little interest, all in marked contrast to those of medieval times.

Where does one look for graffiti in churches? With very few exceptions, and for reasons that are obvious, only the interiors are likely to prove rewarding but even here graffiti are difficult to find. Firstly, exclude from your searches churches whose history is one of drastic restoration. An invaluable aid in finding out which these are, is the Pevsner series of County volumes on the *Buildings of England*. Secondly, churches which have been heavily whitewashed or whose walls and piers have been ruthlessly scraped are unlikely to be worth more than a fleeting visit. Subject to these provisos, graffiti may be found almost anywhere where the building stone is smooth. The most likely places are porches, door jambs, piers, splays of windows, towers, staircases and effigies. Many are so faintly scratched or incised that strong torch light is needed to show them up in relief. Great care and patience have to be exercised if rubbings are taken to ensure that no harm is done to the stonework. The materials we use for this purpose are a chamois leather pad enclosing a ball of cotton wool. This is dipped in a paste made of powdered graphite and a few drops of oil. A piece of thin paper is then placed over the graffito whose outline is firmly pressed into the paper with one's index finger before rubbing the impression in all directions with the pad.

In Buckinghamshire we have so far visited 84 churches all over the county. These are listed in *Appendix A*. Ten churches were locked and we were unable to obtain the key. In 24 we were unsuccessful in finding any graffiti but from the remaining 50 we took 257 rubbings. Many of these are of little artistic or symbolic significance but some are interesting because we have found similar motifs elsewhere in England and this pattern of distribution is one that intrigues us. Below we have selected fifty-one of the more noteworthy graffiti from 24 churches to reflect the wide variety of material.

Reproducing the graffiti is difficult because of the scoring and scraping that has occurred on the stone surfaces over the centuries. To reproduce the graffiti in print as they are would not show them clearly unless all extraneous lines and marks were blacked out and this could involve an alteration of the original material. My wife has therefore drawn them adhering very closely to the rubbings but reducing them where necessary to fit the space available.

Undoubtedly, there is much scope for more widespread and systematic research in this whole field not only in Buckinghamshire but elsewhere in the United Kingdom, for very little material has been published on church graffiti apart from one book and a number of articles, all of which are confined mainly to churches in the eastern counties. A study of the graffiti listed in these, only ten or more years ago, has shown that some of considerable historical interest have already disappeared under the hands of church restorers, many of whom probably never noticed them, or if they did, dismissed them as insignificant doodles.

The scale of the illustrations is expressed as a percentage of the original in the list below.

CHALFONT ST. GILES, St. Giles.

1. A finely scratched cross within a circle on a pillar in the South aisle (33%). Variations of this design have been found in Great Brickhill and Wingrave and in 12 churches in other counties.

2. A geometrical design in the form of a cross with curved ends found on the south wall of the chancel. Perhaps a cross cercelée. (67%). A similar graffito is in Carlisle Cathedral but in this case with small crosses added. (No. 3, 67%). A full description of this is given on pp. 66–67 of *English Medieval Graffiti*. V. Pritchard. Cambridge University Press. 1967.

4. On a pier in the south aisle a mass of small incised circles forming an elongated pattern. (33%). Unlike many found elsewhere in England which consist only of 9 circles in sets of three, these more numerous incised circles have been recorded only in nine other churches in England.

5. On a pier in the south aisle I.H.C. – the first 3 letters of the Greek form of Jesus, (11%). Found also in Lt. Brickhill and in 11 churches in other counties.

CHESHAM, St. Mary.

6. On a pier in the north aisle a profile of a face (17%).

7. On a pillar at the east end of the south aisle facing south a figure wearing a head-dress with a cross on it and holding a ?rod in the left hand (33%).

8. On a pier in the south aisle the outline of a small figure similar to another near the tower end of the south aisle. (44%).

9. On a pier in the north aisle a formal design of a kind commonly found in 17th. century graffiti (22%).

10. On a pier in the south aisle an interesting little motif variations of which have been found in 20 other churches in England (33%).

11. On a pier in the south aisle some writing whose meaning is obscure (33%).

12. On a pier in the north aisle a faint outline of a man's head and shoulders (50%).

DRAYTON PARSLOW, Holy Trinity.

13. On the arch of the south doorway, the incised figure of a robed man (22%).

EDLESBOROUGH, St. Mary.

14. On a pier in the north aisle facing S. a childish drawing of a man with a cross on his chest. (50%).

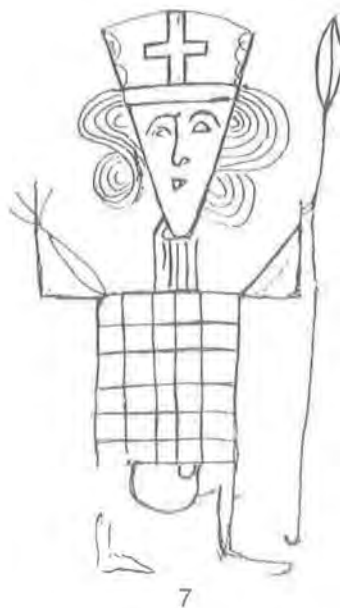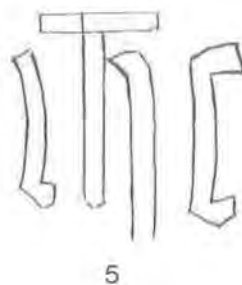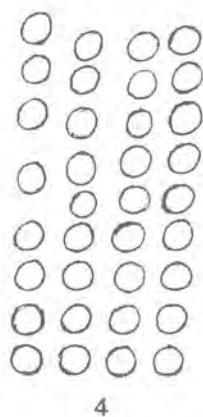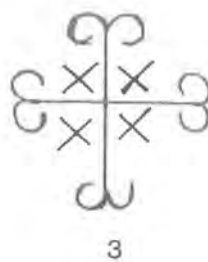15. On the splay of the south window of the chancel the name Henry Pigott (33%).
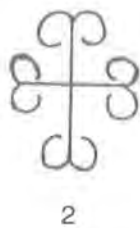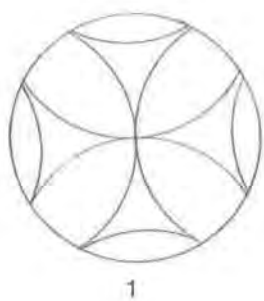
Fig. 1. Buckinghamshire Graffiti.
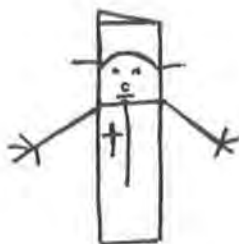
Fig. 2. Buckinghamshire Graffiti.

GREAT BRICKHILL, St. Mary.

16. On the jamb (W.) of the south door what appears to be an elaborate architectural drawing (22%). On the west jamb of a window in the north aisle, old writing too faint to reproduce.

GREAT HORWOOD, St. James.

17. On a south aisle pier, two birds (33%).

18. On the easternmost pier of the north aisle, a circular design (33%).

HARDWICK, St. Mary.

19. On a pier in the south aisle a *swastika-pelta*. (22%). This ancient design is found in many churches, illuminated manuscripts and in sculpture. For a full description see *Pritchard* (op. cit. pp. 33–37).

20. On a pier in the south aisle a cross above a shield very similar to another found in Westminster Abbey Cloister (33%).

21. On a pier in the south aisle facing the south door the drawing of a human head on a bird's body (33%).

HILLESDEN, All Saints.

22. A simple swastika-pelta (33%).

23. Near the pulpit an intricate circular design (50%).

24. On the ashlar faced chancel wall on the North side, two hands. Graffiti of this kind were common in the 17th. and 18th. centuries (33%).

25. On the north wall to the west of the north door a drawing of a church (17%). On the north wall to the west of the north door old writing. Good example, but not possible to reproduce.

HULCOTT, All Saints.

26. On a 16th. century tomb chest 2 names clearly scratched, Thomas Fountein and John Stratfolde. Thomas Fountein, as patron of the living, presented John Williams as Vicar in 1622 (67%).
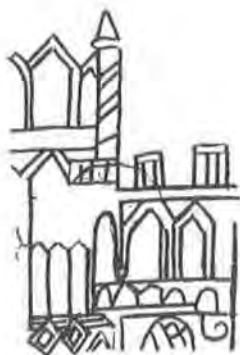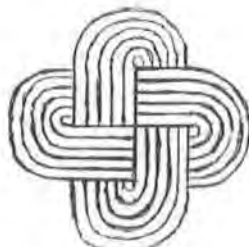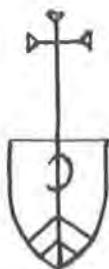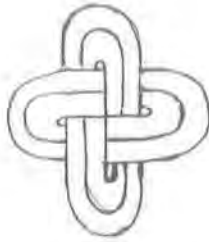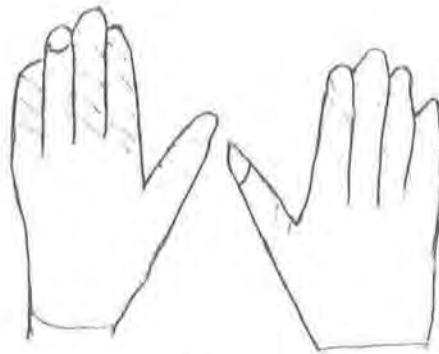
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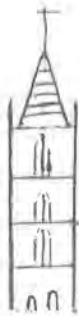21

Fig. 3. Buckinghamshire Graffiti.

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IOHN
STRATFOLDE

THOMAS
FOVNTEIN

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Fig. 4. Buckinghamshire Graffiti.

ICKFORD, St. Nicholas.
27. Scratched on a window sill of the north wall an indistinct outline of an old game called *Nine Mens' Morris* (17%).

IVINGHOE, St. Mary.
28. On a pier at the eastern end of the south aisle, a strange-looking animal. (33%). On a pier in the south aisle facing N. and low down, an intricate circular design similar to No. 23 (Hillesden).

LANGLEY MARISH, St. Mary.
29. On pier in the north aisle, miscellaneous graffiti (33%).

LAVENDON, St. Michael.
30. A motif suggesting branches, on the jamb of the porch east window (50%).

LITTLE BRICKHILL, St. Mary Magdelene.
31. On a pier in the south aisle an unusual design not found in churches elsewhere (22%).

32. On a south aisle pier a ragged staff. This is also a common graffito in other counties. There are 4 good examples in Little Brickhill church. Various interpretations as to the meaning of the motif have been given. (22%).

33. On a south aisle pier a pot, with what appear to be stalks or lines emerging from the top (33%).

34. On a south aisle pier a faint outline of a woman wearing a head-dress of a shape found in the 13th. century (33%). A detailed description both of fig. 33 and fig. 34 is given in Pritchard (op. cit. pp. 20–22).

LITTLE MISSENDEN, St. John the Baptist.
35. On the west wall of the chancel several small crosses reputed, according to a church leaflet, to have been made by crusaders before going on their journeys (33%).

MARSWORTH, All Saints.
36. On a pier in the north aisle, a finely-drawn shield (17%). There are other shields in this church.

37. On the south side of the chancel arch, a drawing of a man and his donkey. (67%).

38. On a pier in the south chapel, a drawing of leaves. Very few of this kind have been found elsewhere (33%).
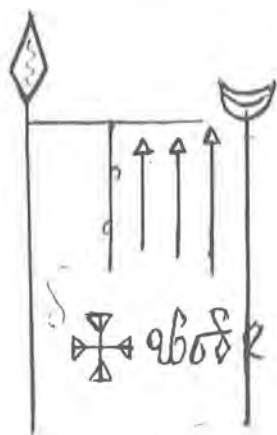
STEWKLEY, St. Michael.
39. On the jamb of a doorway an enclosed cross. Variations of this are common elsewhere (33%).
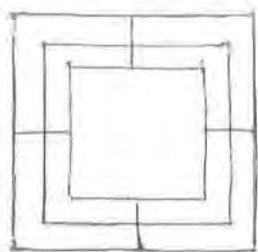
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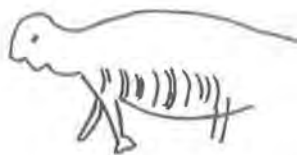
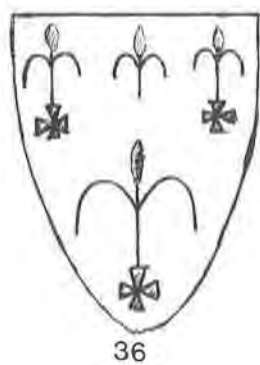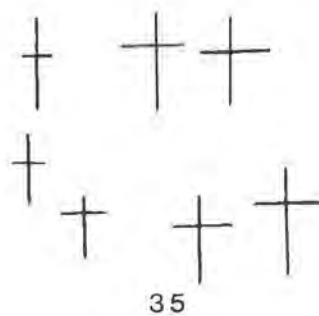28

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Fig. 5. Buckinghamshire Graffiti.

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Fig. 6. Buckinghamshire Graffiti.

STOKE POGES, St. Giles.

40. Low down on the east jamb of the south doorway, a faint outline of an old boat. (67%).

41. On the south porch door, a shield (67%).

42. On a south aisle pier, a faint outline of a man with his left arm out stretched and apparently leading a horse behind him (17%).

STONE, St. John the Baptist.

43. On the north tower pier facing S.E. and low down the very faint drawing of a woman wearing a long dress (22%).

44. On a north aisle pier facing south, a crowned head (50%).

WENDOVER, St. Mary.

45. On a pier in the south aisle, 2 shields (22%).

46. On a pier in the north aisle facing S. the upper part of a curious graffito. The lower part is too indistinct to reproduce (33%).

WESTON TURVILLE, St. Mary.

47. On a sill in the north aisle a 5-pointed star. Commonly found in churches elsewhere. (67%).


WESTON UNDERWOOD, St. Laurence.

48. On a pier in the north aisle facing south, a crude fleur de lys. (33%).


WHITCHURCH, St. John the Evangelist.

49. On a pier in the north aisle, a shield which includes a 5 pointed star (33%). On a pier in the north aisle 2 early dates.

WINGRAVE, St. Peter and St. Paul.

50. In a passage off the north chancel a sketch of a ?window design (33%).

51. On a north tower pier facing south, swathed figures (33%). Numerous crosses on a pier in the south aisle and on the east jamb of the south doorway. Also on the west jamb of the south window of the sanctuary a considerable amount of old writing.
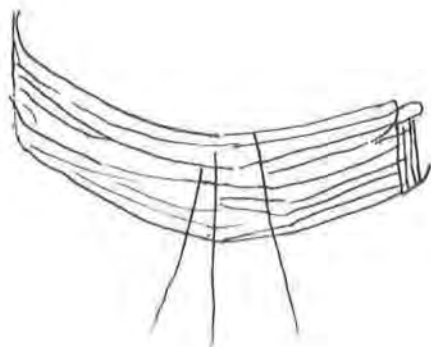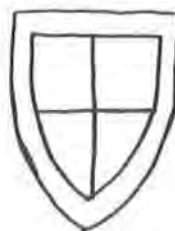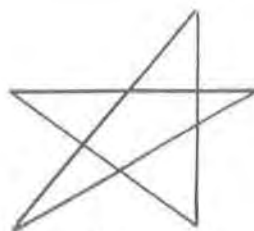
Fig. 7. Buckinghamshire Graffiti.

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Fig. 8. Buckinghamshire Graffiti.

APPENDIX A

CHURCHES VISITED IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Addington.	Fingest.	Lillingstone Dayrell.	Ravenstone.
Adstock.	Granborough.	Lillingstone Lovell.	Stewkley.
Amersham.	Great Brickhill.	Little Brickhill.	Stoke Goldington.
Bierton.	Great Hampden.	Little Horwood.	Stoke Hammond.
Buckland.	Great Horwood.	Little Kimble.	Stoke Poges.
Burnham.	Great Kimble.	Little Marlow.	Stokenchurch.
Castlethorpe.	Grendon Underwood.	Little Missenden.	Stone.
Chalfont St. Giles.	Hambleden.	Linslade, (St. Mary)	Swanbourne.
Cheddington.	Hanslope.	Long Crendon.	Thornborough.
Chetwode.	Hardwick.	Ludgershall.	Twyford.
Chesham.	Hillesden.	Maids' Moreton.	Upper Winchenden.
Chilton.	Hitcham.	Marsh Gibbon.	Waddesdon.
Cuddington.	Hoggeston.	Marsworth.	Wendover.
Denham.	Hulcott.	Medmenham.	Weston Turville.
Dinton.	Ibstone.	Monks Risborough.	Weston Underwood.
Dorton.	Ickford.	North Marston.	Whaddon.
Drayton Beauchamp.	Iver.	Olney.	Whitchurch.
Drayton Parslow.	Ivinghoe.	Oving.	Wing.
Dunton.	Langley Marish.	Pitstone.	Wingrave.
Edlesborough.	Lavendon.	Quainton.	Winslow.
Emberton.	Leckhampstead.	Radnage.	Wraysbury.

APPENDIX B

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