

St Nicholas church, Bishop's Sutton

Historical graffiti survey report



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St Nicholas church, Bishop's Sutton.

A brief description

The church was built in the 12th century as a simple two bay structure of nave and chancel by the Bishop of Winchester, Henry de Blois. From this period date the fine south doorway with its characterful beakheads (Fig 1), and the wide chancel arch.



1 The south doorway with beakheads

The church was later added to, and parts rebuilt. The chancel is of the early 13th century and has two surviving consecration crosses painted on each side of the east window (Fig 2).

Pevsner refers to the early 14th century squint which may have served an anchorite's cell or north chapel. At the west end are the four sturdy 14th century wooden posts supporting the bell turret. Some restoration was carried out in the Victorian period and a vestry added.

The church contains some interesting monuments. In the chancel is a 15th century brass depicting a knight and lady and a ledger stone and monument to William Cowper, the anatomist and surgeon, who died in 1709.



2 The east end with consecration crosses

The church is on the pilgrimage route to Canterbury and pilgrims are still welcomed here with refreshments.

Graffiti survey methodology

Group members first scanned the building to locate the graffiti, using a raking light source in the interior, and ambient daylight on the exterior. The team then recorded each mark or sets of marks 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 also recorded.

Graffiti summary and discussion

The porch and south doorway

Unsurprisingly, for a much-visited religious site, most of the graffiti is around the main entrance, the south doorway, the first point of contact for pilgrims, other visitors and local parishioners, where they could leave their marks and emblems of devotion. However, there are very few crosses, the symbols usually associated with pilgrimage, in this part of the church.



On the west side of the doorway is one faint possible devotional mark, a pair of intersecting Vs forming a W shape, which could be a symbol for the Virgin Mary, VV standing for Virgo Virginum, Virgin of the Virgins (Fig 3). Most of the graffiti here consists of pairs of initials, sometimes boxed, and sometimes with dates. This type of graffiti dates from the seventeenth century onwards, when literacy was more widespread and people could write their names. The accompanying dates include examples from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Figs 4 & 5).

3 South doorway, west side. Intersecting Vs, possible devotional mark for the Virgin Mary



4 South doorway, east side. Boxed initials dated 1718 and initials IW



5 South doorway, west side. Boxed sets of initials from the 1600s and 1700s. Scratch dial at top of block

Above the group of initials on the west side of the doorway, shown in Fig 5, are radiating lines which are probably a scratch or mass dial. A stick inserted in a central hole at the top would have served as a gnomon, casting a shadow to show the hour of the day when particular religious offices would be carried out by the priest. These dials were usually next to the church entrance. Another dial can be found on a reused stone block on the exterior of the building. (Fig 14). These dials were recorded by Green (1943) although he refers to 2 dials being on the west jamb of the south doorway.

Most notable is the finely carved name and date R. Cranston 1752, engraved within the porch on the west side of the south doorway, on the impost over the column and continuing onto the door surround and jamb (Figs 6 & 7).



6 South doorway, impost above west column capital. Beginning of R. Cranston inscription. Other initials TB, EN



7 South doorway, west side. R. Cranston 1752 inscription running around impost onto arch

I am indebted to my colleague, Helen Banham, for drawing my attention to the book *Ropley's Legacy* by Chris Heal, which mentions Robert Cranston, labourer, of Bishop's Sutton who, in 1744 undertook a perambulation around Bishop's Sutton seeking to prove his right to two small areas of land.

It would seem fair to assume that this is the same person, and that 1752 could be the date Cranston settled his claim. He could have recorded his name on the church fabric to add legitimacy to this claim. Church porches were often used for the transaction of local business and the payment of debt, which would add weight to this theory. It could also explain the presence of so many other sets of dated initials from this time.

Above the beakheads the traces of a faint inscription can be seen on the west side of the arch (Fig 8).



8 *Traces of inscription on arch above beakheads*

Also in the porch, to the west of the doorway on the outer face, is a semicircular mark which could be a mason's mark (Fig 9). No other examples of masons' marks were found during the survey.



9 *South doorway, west side. Possible mason's mark*

The church interior

Within the **nave**, there is graffiti on the east and west jambs of the north doorway. This includes sets of parallel lines, some of which could possibly be music staves, as one area has marks superimposed which could represent musical notation (Fig 10).



10 Nave, north doorway, possible musical notation

On the north jamb of the **chancel arch** the graffiti includes several crosses, one of which has dots at the terminals and lines joined to form a triangle at the top (Fig 11).



11 Chancel arch, north jamb, crosses

Nearby are two crosses adjacent to the initials RM (Fig 12). The presence of these crosses in a particular area could indicate that this was a site of a pre-Reformation altar.



12 Chancel arch, north jamb, initials RM and 2 crosses

On the east jamb of the **south door** is a mark made of 2 inverted intersecting Vs which could be the initial M, as in the initials RM noted above, or possibly a so-called Marian mark, incised as symbol of devotion to the Virgin Mary (Fig 13).

A small cross is incised within the **squint**, on the north side of the chancel, and fine marking out lines made by masons are visible around the decorative opening (Fig 14).



13 Chancel, south door, east jamb, initial M or Marian mark?



14 Chancel, squint, marking out lines

The church exterior

On the angle between the nave and chancel on the south side three different types of marks can be seen, on blocks of stone one above the other (Fig 15).



15 South face, angle between nave and chancel, dot patterns, scratch dial and Ordnance Survey benchmark

At the top a group of dots have been drilled. The purpose of these is not known, although it is sometimes suggested that these are areas where stone has been scraped away to be used in folk remedies and potions, a tradition that is known to have occurred in holy places and shrines all over Christian Europe (James Wright, 2021). Dots were also used as guides for the carving of shapes such as crosses, as that shown in Fig 11.



16 Chancel exterior, northeast corner, dots

Another group of more regularly spaced dots is on a block on the northeast corner of the chancel (Fig 16).

Below the dots is another scratch or mass dial, with lines radiating beneath a central hole. As these dials were usually next to the church entrance, this block has probably been moved and reused.

Beneath this is an Ordnance Survey benchmark. Although not graffiti, this mark is of historical interest and can be seen marked on the Six-Inch Ordnance Survey map of 1872, as BM 276.5 (Fig 17).



17 Six-Inch Ordnance Survey map of 1872, arrow showing location of benchmark on church

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Acknowledgements

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References

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Survey archive

154 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.

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