



Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project

## **St Peter's Ropley**

### **Church survey report**

#### **Introduction**

The church was visited on Saturday July 14<sup>th</sup> 2018 by a team from the Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project, consisting of Helen Banham, Mark Barden, Karen Parker and Karen Wardley. It was very hot with bright sunshine, making photographic conditions challenging.

Sadly, this church was almost completely gutted by a fire in 2014, but plans are under way to restore and rebuild it. The parish council kindly allowed us access on site, providing a rare opportunity to see a church structure stripped to its bones. While some of the fabric has been totally destroyed, some areas have survived, and a number of these hold significant amounts of historical graffiti. This graffiti represents the beliefs and actions of people who visited the church in the past. It provides another insight into the building's history and is a valuable resource for historians and researchers. The historical significance of some of Ropley's graffiti is described in Helen Banham's report at the end of this document.

By locating and recording this graffiti we hope it can be protected and preserved *in situ* as the building is restored.

#### **The Graffiti**

##### **The exterior**

Dense undergrowth made access to most areas of the exterior impossible. However, we did examine the brick south porch. We found one brick inscribed 1780, and others with initials and more illegible marks.

Figure 1 1780 date on east side of porch



## The interior

Care had to be taken during the survey due to the uneven and fragile floor, with underlying vaults. Other areas had rubble piled against walls, and although there was a ladder going up into the tower we did stay at ground level.

## The south porch

The south porch leads to a south doorway under a fine Tudor arch, with a striking Green Man in the east spandrel. The doorway contains a large amount of graffiti, including many initials and dates. The date 1711 is repeated several times and is accompanied by different sets of initials.

*Figure 2 Initials TP and 1711 date in porch*



See Helen Banham's report for discussion about this.

Marking-out lines made by masons carving the arch can be seen on both sides of the doorway.

## The south tower

The area at the base of the tower revealed some possible masons' marks on blocks of stone in the north-east corner, partly obscured by later pillars.



*Figure 2 Mason's mark in tower*

On one small patch of remaining plaster are parts of 2 concentric circles, possibly the traces of a consecration cross, as these crosses often had circular borders.



*Figure 3 Plaster with part of possible consecration cross*



*Figure 4 Location of plaster with consecration cross inside tower*

Some of the bricks in this area, from which the plaster had been burnt off, had incised lines and crosses, their significance unclear.

The large, well-seasoned timbers of the tower survived the fire. On one of the uprights are tear-shaped burn marks which go deep into the surface of the wood. These marks used to be thought to be accidental burns made by candles or tapers, but recent research and experimentation reveal that such marks were made deliberately, probably to serve an apotropaic or ritual protection function, against fire. If this was the case, sadly they had limited effect.



Figure 5 Taper burn marks in tower

## The chancel



Figure 6 Octagonal pillar in south arcade

The most striking graffiti, in terms of quantity and quality, can be found on an octagonal pillar in the south arcade of the chancel, directly in front of a doorway in the south wall. Pevsner dates this arcade to c1300, providing a *terminus post quem* for the graffiti here.

There are an impressive number of crosses on the pillar, with a concentration on the east side. They are carefully made, the terminals ending in circular dots. The phenomenon of such groups of crosses is often attributed to visiting pilgrims, on their way to holy shrines, but it is just as likely that these crosses represent the prayers of local parishioners, who left their mark on entering the church. A similar grouping of crosses on a south pillar near a door is found at Houghton All Saints church.



*Figure 7 Group of crosses on octagonal pillar*

There are a number of VV marks, thought to be dedications to the Virgin Mary. There is a group of small, compass-drawn circles, on one face. Such marks are also thought to be apotropaic, protecting a building from evil spirits and the Devil, and are common finds in churches and secular buildings all over the country. There are also many initials, some enclosed within boxes, and 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century dates (including 1711 again).



*Figure 8 17th century dates and initials on pillar*

Some finely carved inscriptions are also present, including one which travels round two faces of the pillar. These are hard to decipher, but one includes the sacred monogram IHC. Another possible Christogram, XCR, also occurs, framed in a possible banner.



*Figure 9 Ihc monogram on pillar*

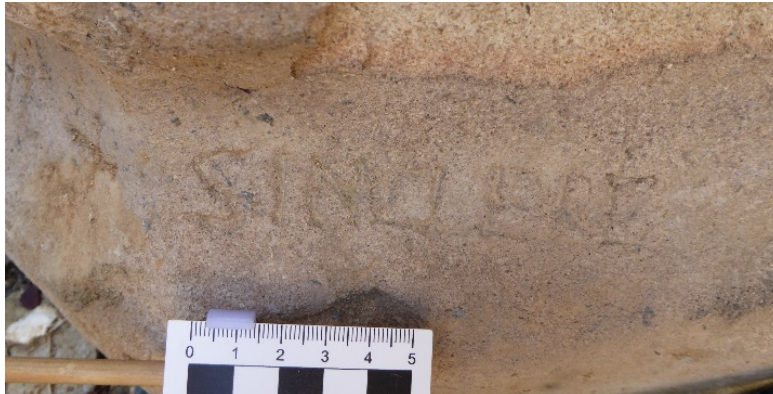
On a more light-hearted note, we found a face, consisting of two eyes, a nose and mouth, making use of existing marks on the stone.



*Figure 10 Face on pillar*

## The font

The original font survives in a very sorry state, its top covered with the molten remains of its lead lining. However, on the plinth there survive some carefully scratched names and initials. No dates are present but it may well be possible to identify these people through further research.



*Figure 11 The name SINCLERE on base of font*

## The survey

The Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project is a volunteer-led and run project, aiming to locate and record historical graffiti in a thorough and systematic way in churches and other historic buildings across Hampshire. It is being carried out under the auspices of the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society, and further details about the project, and survey summaries, can be found on its website: [www.hantsfieldclub.org.uk](http://www.hantsfieldclub.org.uk).

Summary reports of our findings are also lodged with the Historic Environment Record in the relevant council Planning Department.

Karen Wardley

## **The historical significance of the graffiti seen at Ropley St Peter's**

Church graffiti offers us the chance to look at the lives of those who worshipped in the church over hundreds of years. These are marks left by the ordinary people of the parish, marks made by those who worked the land, built the church, who came into this place of worship to share moments in their lives. Little is known about how the common people interacted with their church but these marks allow a small glimpse into what was important to them. Rites of passage may have been marked, significant events in a parish recorded, they tell us of religious devotion and celebration, of the fears they faced, of demons, fire and countless other things yet to be interpreted.

Each church carries within its graffiti the history of its community and so when we undertake a survey we carry out further studies to see if we can discover more about the people and events that may be linked to the marks made.

Until the middle of the of the C16th inclusion of a date was rare. The emergence of dates coincides with the Reformation and is also the period when legal documents were dated with the calendar year not the regnal year and were thus easier to inscribe into the fabric of the church.

### **Ropley dates**

A number of dates were visible on both the south porch and the octagonal pillar.

A repeat of the date 1711 on the south porch is particularly interesting.

Matthew Champion in his book 'Medieval Graffiti' 2015, suggests that although nowadays the church entrance and porch has little significance, in times past, the porch was an area in which both religious and social functions were carried out. Marriage for example took place in the porch with only the highest ranking people allowed to be married within the main body of the church. Evidence also tells us that the porch acted as an administrative centre for the parish where people came to draw up agreements, sign contracts and witness documents.

So is 1711 a significant date in Ropley's history?

On the 20th December 1710 the first ever private bill of enclosure was passed for the enclosure of Ropley Commons, an estimated 500 acres of land in the manors of Bishops Sutton and Ropley, in which the tenants of these manors had the sole right of communing.

The land was considered to be of little value but capable of improvement. Tenants would be allowed to enclose, plough and sow their allotted plots and the poor would benefit by being employed to do the work and this would all tend to the public good.

Each tenant would be allotted his due share and proportion under the hands of William Godwin of Ovington, Richard Seaward of Bishops Sutton and Henry Whitear of Lanham Old Alresford. These men elected and chosen by the tenants to divide the land fairly.

This is a very important moment for those living in the parish. Were documents prepared and the administration carried out in the porch, witnessed and dated by those present with the marks of crosses and initials?

We cannot know for certain but the repetition of the date 1711 is suggestive of some sort of event in the community that involved a number of people.

Other dates appear with initials close by but it would be impossible to say that they were made at the same time. A search was made to see if the date 1796 could be related to two pairs of initials MB and IH but nothing has been found so far.

A date that is potentially interesting is 1654 with initials IB close by. The Commonwealth ended in 1653 and Oliver Cromwell established the Protectorate. Church records during the Commonwealth were largely absent and those made during the Protectorate were often destroyed after the restoration. During the Commonwealth marriages were not supposed to take place in a church but the date 1654 may have been a person's way of marking the time when such restrictions were lifted. It is therefore interesting to see this date at Ropley.

### **Ropley names**

Only one complete name remains at Ropley and this can be found at the base of the font pedestal. It appears to read Joane + Sinclere

A search of all the baptisms for Ropley revealed nothing. What is interesting is the name Sinclere (Sinclair) is a rare surname in Hampshire. A search of marriages and burials also drew a blank. It would have been really interesting to have found Joane as it is unusual to find a female name inscribed. A search was also made on Sinclere as a forename but that also returned a negative result.

Helen Banham