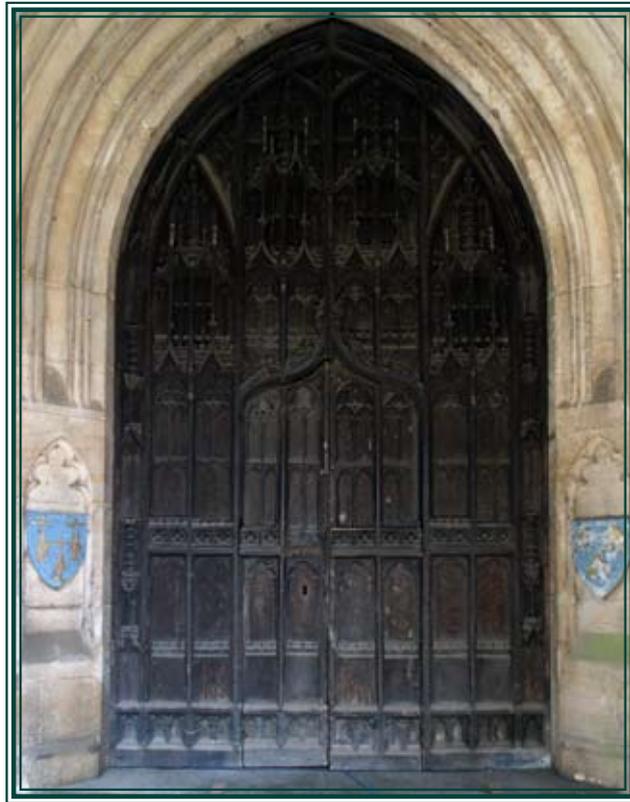


Graffiti Survey Record
St Nicholas Chapel, Kings Lynn, Norfolk
The South Porch
Client: Churches Conservation Trust



Analysis & Interpretation

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South Porch, St Nicholas Chapel, Kings Lynn

Project Summary

The results of a raking light scaled photographic graffiti survey of the interior of the South Porch, St Nicholas Chapel, Kings Lynn, on behalf of the Churches Conservation Trust.

Location:

St Ann's Street, Kings Lynn, Norfolk, PE30 1NH

OS Grid Ref:

TF 61845 20467

Designation Status:

St Nicholas Chapel Grade 1 listed building (National Heritage List 384263),

Date first listed: 1st December 1951.

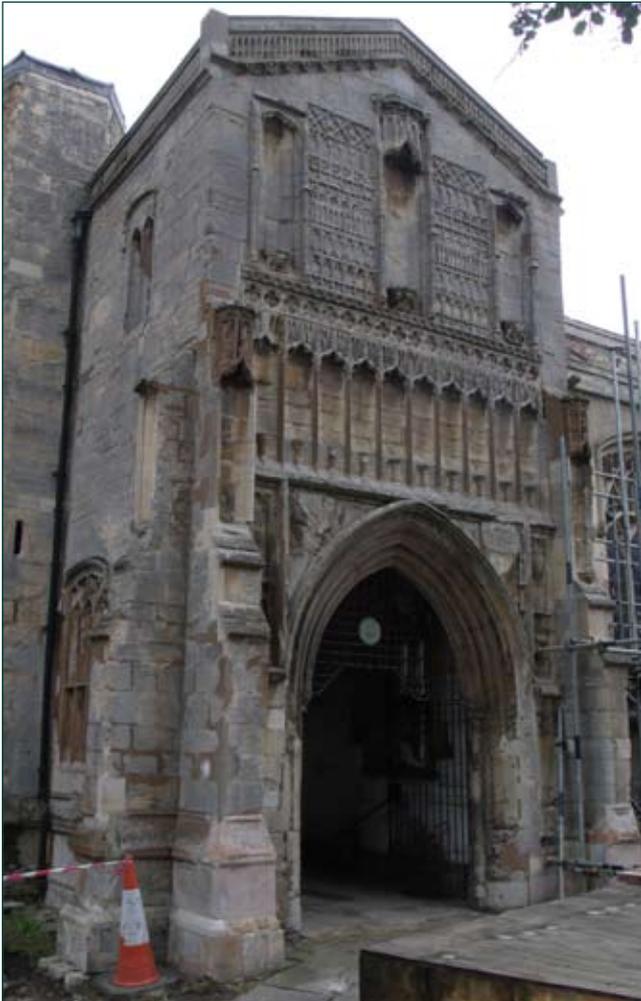
Background:

Although constructed on a monumental scale St Nicholas' is technically only a Chapel of Ease for St Margaret's church; albeit the largest Chapel of Ease in England. The chapel was founded in 1146 by Bishop Turbus to serve the growing commercial port of Lynn. The site was substantially reconstructed in the early thirteenth century, with a further major reconstruction taking place between 1371-1419 - replacing all of the earlier structure with the exception of the south-west tower. The landmark steeple was originally constructed in the late fifteenth/early sixteenth century. However, this structure collapsed in 1741, not being rebuilt until 1861 under the direction of Gilbert Scott. The chapel interior is considered to be one of the finest examples of the perpendicular style in England.

The Site:

The South Porch appears part of the late fourteenth/early fifteenth century building phase that saw the reconstruction of the majority of the chapel, and was largely constructed of high quality Barnack limestone. It is of fairly typical East Anglian style for the period, being of two storeys, and a highly decorated south front. The southern elevation contains two tiers of image niches, with three principal image niches set above a second tier of ten niches, which are in turn flanked by two further image niches set at a slightly lower level in each of the southern buttresses. Each of these niches would once have contained an elaborately carved and painted statue, all of which

are now lost, and no clues as to their identity remain on the structure. The tree upper tiers are, in turn, supported by carved grotesques with each niche being separated by elaborate panels of ornate blind tracery decoration. The spandrels to the main outer doorway each contain a shield bearing, respectively from east to west, the instruments of the Passion and the Trinity. The most striking feature of the South Porch is the heavily restored Lierne vaulting, which shows God at the centre of the vault, wearing a Papal tiara and surrounded by angels and grotesques. The main doors from the porch to the chapel are of elaborate carved timber in imitation of an eight light tracery window design, containing numerous small carvings of human figures in attitudes of prayer.



Left: the south elevation of the South Porch at St Nicholas' Chapel showing the high quality stone decoration.

Above: Detail of the carved decoration from the south door, circa 1410.

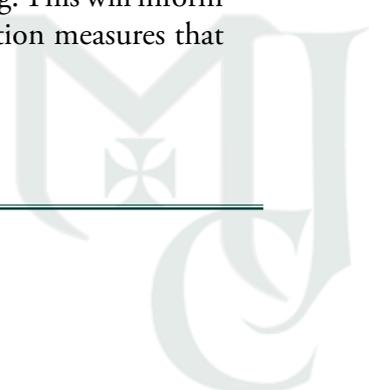
Project Brief:

To undertake a variety of non-invasive photographic and measured raking light surveys of the South Porch of St Nicholas' Chapel. The purpose of the present survey was to record the location and details of the graffiti, and to assess their origin and the information presented by these inscriptions. The resulting report provides a photographic survey of the graffiti, linked to a plan of their location with a focus on interpretation, presentation and understanding. This will inform the nature of any repairs and includes recommendations for future conservation measures that might be needed to safeguard the graffiti.

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Equipment:

A variety of light sources to include 250w halogen floodlights, LED floodlights, and UV hand-held spotlights. Photography: a variety of digital format cameras with a minimum image resolution of 14 megapixels.

Methodology

All areas were initially examined using hand held LED light sources to determine areas of possible concentration of graffiti inscriptions. Once areas of inscriptions have been identified these areas were subject to a raking light photometric survey. All resulting image positions were recorded on a general plan of the survey areas. In areas where deemed necessary multiple raking light images were overlaid to create a complete map image and inscription lines were highlighted using a variety of corrective processes. Where images were difficult to decipher, or were in poor condition, interpretation images were created by altering the colour balance of the raw data to highlight any potential surviving inscriptions.

The graffiti inscriptions

The location of the graffiti inscriptions in the porch is fairly typical of the distribution patterns we see within English churches, and East Anglian churches in particular. Porches that have escaped severe restoration and renovation tend to show marked concentrations of graffiti, most particularly around the door surrounds, and St Nicholas' chapel demonstrates patterns that we have come to expect. In terms of quantity there are far fewer inscriptions than might be expected of a typical East Anglia church. However, it has previously been noted that churches located within an urban setting are far less likely to still contain the quantity of inscriptions found in more rural churches. In some part this may be explained by the fact that urban churches are most usually far better cared for than their rural counterparts, having far more money lavished upon them on a regular basis, and are more likely to have undergone more numerous restorations than their poorer rural neighbours - with the resultant destruction and obliteration of any graffiti inscriptions that might be present. However, whilst the quantity of graffiti inscriptions at St Nicholas' chapel may be limited, the quality of the inscriptions that are present is generally high. Although abrasion of the stone surfaces has led to obvious losses and general wear it is clear that the remaining graffiti was neatly executed in a very deliberate manner.

Discussion

The role of the porch

The graffiti located in the south porch appears to be far more than random doodling of bored members of the medieval congregation. Analysis of other medieval porches has shown that there are certain types of early graffiti inscriptions that appear likely to be recorded in porches rather than any other parts of the church. This suggests that those inscriptions may well have been related to activities specifically taking place in the church porch. The findings from St Nicholas' chapel would appear to support this assertion, and the graffiti inscriptions located in the south porch not only follow already established patterns of distribution but include several examples of graffiti types noted in porches elsewhere. Why this should be so is perhaps worthy of further explanation.

Today the role of a church porch is largely that of an entrance vestibule designed to shield the principle doorway from the weather, and afford some brief protection from the elements for people

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entering and leaving the church. However, in the Middle Ages its function was far more diverse and significant. Many of the most important ceremonies on the medieval church - marriage, burial and the churching of women - either began or took place in the church porch. The porch was considered spiritually significant, and was a sought after place of burial for the parish elite. However, the porch was also significant in the civil administration of the medieval parish. It was here that people came to sign agreements, witness affidavits and make verbal agreements. The porch acted as a de facto parish office and, in cases of two storey porches, the upper storey often acted as parish muniments room, armoury and vestry rolled in to one.

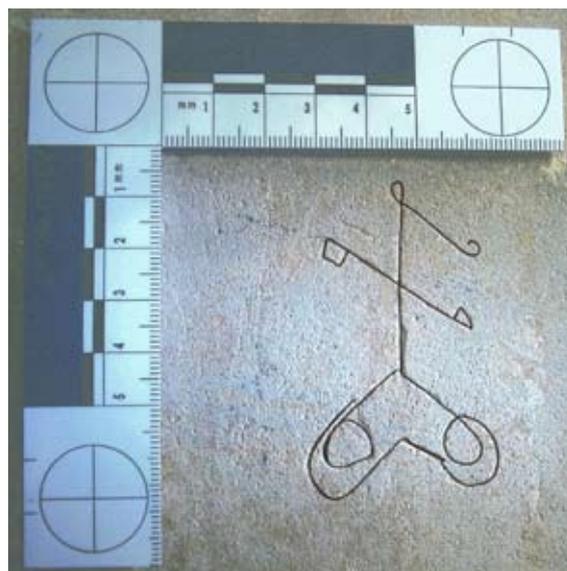
Merchant's Marks and crosses

The traditional interpretation of Merchant's Marks is that they were unique identifiable symbols adopted by individual merchants to mark their goods, sign documents and decorate their business premises. The concept is a simple one; to have a mark that was obviously associated with one particular merchant that would be recognisable to both the literate and illiterate alike. In this respect they can be considered akin to the modern business logo. However, in real terms the use of a merchant's mark went far beyond the everyday uses of business and administration. To many successful merchants the mark appears to have acted very much as a substitute for the heraldic devices of the noble classes, to which only the most prosperous and successful merchants ever had a chance of aspiring to. The marks are found appearing upon memorial brasses, ornate fire surrounds and decorating the merchant's own houses and warehouses, in much the same way that armorial bearings would be used by members of the nobility.



Above: a small selection of early Merchant's Marks recorded by Girling in Suffolk churches.

Right: early Merchant's mark recorded a few miles around the coast from Kings Lynn at Blakeney.



These markings can also be demonstrated as being, upon occasion, territorial in nature. At sites such as Wiveton in North Norfolk the same merchant's mark appears on all the piers of the north arcade. At Wiveton the congregation appear to have unusually favoured the north door, and each example is deeply and deliberately cut at about eye level, making it one of the most obvious things you would have seen as you entered the church. Whilst the whole church is covered in graffiti it is clear that these merchants marks were intended to stand out. The most obvious interpretation is that these markings are making it clear that the particular merchant to whom the mark belonged, and his identity has yet to be discovered, was most certainly associated with the north aisle. What this association was, whether he was a donor, patron or simply a territorial member of the congregation, is unclear.

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Merchant's marks were also clearly intended to be deeply personal in nature, and can be considered as standing in for the individual's own name or signature. As such they were a quick and simple way of linking an individual merchant to an area, a belief or an idea. In Norwich cathedral concentrations of merchant's marks are to be found associated with parts of the building that also show clear concentrations of apotropaic symbols or ritual protection markings. This coincidence of concentrations appears to be far more than chance, suggesting that the merchant's marks may have been placed in these particular areas for the same reasons that the apotropaic symbols were; to associate themselves with areas of enhanced spiritual significance within the building. This wish to associate merchant's marks with areas of spiritual significance may explain the general phenomena of merchant's marks being recorded etched in to the fabric of numerous parish churches, and may well explain the example recorded at St Nicholas' chapel.



Left: A small selection of the many thousands of crosses recorded in the porches of medieval parish churches.

However, the fact that the symbol was recorded in the porch may well indicate that the mark was placed there because it was directly related to an activity taking place in the porch. This may be in some way related to the porch's role as the site of business agreements, where contracts were signed, or represent a merchant's involvement in a verbal agreement - for which the mark acted as the physical embodiment. It is also worth noting that the crosses recorded around the doorway have also been suggested as being related to the drawing up of just such agreements. With crosses actually being relatively rare discoveries within the main body of the majority of surveyed churches, but most usually being located in the porch or around the doorway, this symbol too has come to be seen as relating to activities taking place in the porch. With crosses often found on documents recording written agreements, and punctuating written prayers, it is impossible to merely label such symbols as either spiritual or secular, and it is entirely possible that they had a dual function that involved elements of both. It may well be that the presence of the merchant's mark and crosses etched into the church fabric was in some manner asking for a

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spiritual blessing upon a verbal agreement undertaken in the porch, perhaps even acting as some form of legitimisation or formalisation, in the manner that a signature acted in such a way upon a written document. The associations between the chapel and the town's mercantile community are clear, and it appears that the bond between community and church went far beyond those of finance and patronage. The presence of the merchant's mark in the porch indicates that, no matter exactly why it was inscribed, it was an action that had significance for the person responsible for it; a significance that was, in their eyes, enhanced by its location.

Ship Graffiti: meaning and context

The most fundamental question concerning the phenomena of ship graffiti must be regarded as why it was actually created? What was its purpose and meaning? Did it indeed have meaning or does it simply represent the idle doodling of a largely maritime based society?

Early maritime communities were widely noted amongst their contemporaries for what, in the Protestant reformation, became known as 'superstitions'. In terms of surviving graffiti inscriptions it was not just maritime communities, but all those who had to undertake potentially hazardous sea voyages, who fell back upon quasi-religious acts of superstition. The catacombs beneath Rome, burial place of many early Christians, became an attraction to late medieval pilgrims travelling to Rome, or stopping there on their longer pilgrimages to the holy land. These pilgrims took the opportunity to inscribe the surfaces of the catacombs with their own graffiti. Often in the form of prayers, perhaps directed at a number of the saints and early church martyrs reputed to be buried within the catacombs, they show a marked anxiety associated with travel by sea. 'Holy souls, pray for a safe crossing for us', writes one, whilst another asks the saints to 'grant us a safe journey over the sea' (Sumption, 1975, p.218).

Whilst travellers by sea may have sought safety in graffiti prayers the mariners themselves appear, if anything, to have been even more superstitious, hardly surprising in an environment where lives, livelihoods and fortunes could be lost in a matter of minutes by an unforeseen storm. For medieval mariners the chapel of St Edmund at Wainfleet in Lincolnshire was a particular draw for local sailors. A crew from nearby Skegness, who had been saved from destruction at sea, visited the shrine there to present a large ship model made of wax and provided for a candle to burn each day at mass 'for a very long time' (Webb, 2000, p.81).

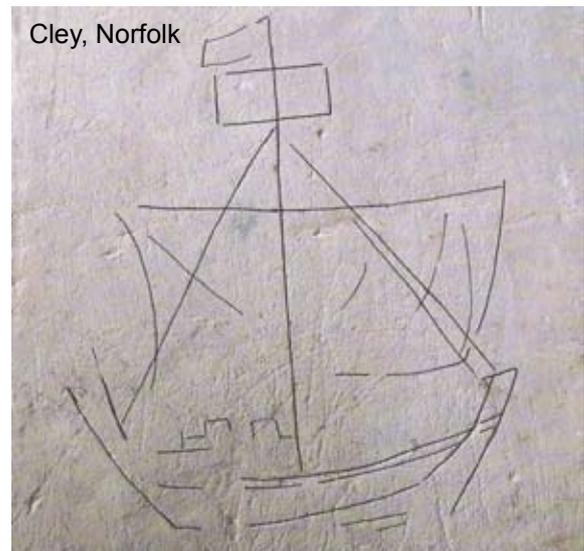
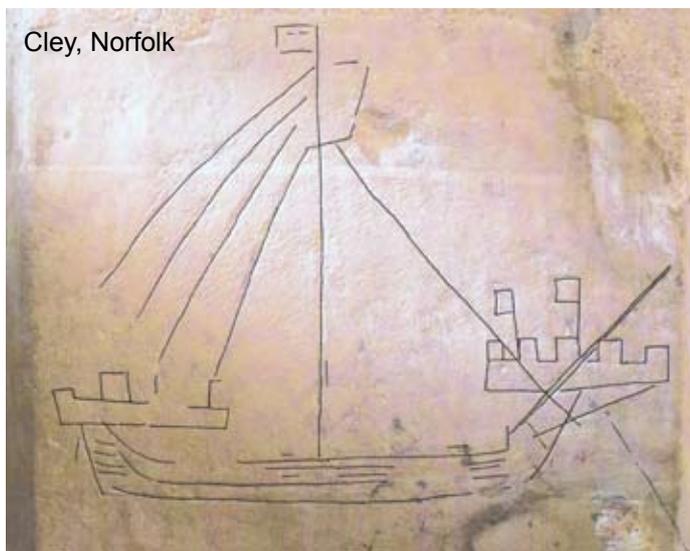
Even after the rejection of the catholic church in England the superstitious nature of mariners was still remarked upon. The 17th century notebooks of practising astrologer William Lilly give a vivid insight into the general belief in what the reformers of a century before would have described as superstition. Although Lilly's case notebooks are by no means complete they indicate that he was being consulted on a wide variety of matters, ranging from trivial losses of personal property to the fate of entire ships at sea. In the two year period of June 1654 to September 1656 he records being consulted on 4403 individual matters. Of the 683 cases in which he recorded the nature of the enquiry or the clients status about a sixth directly relate to matters involving maritime trade and sailors. Although Lilly practised in London, whose bustling port formed the core of the city's trade, the proportion of seafarers reverting to Lilly would still appear disproportionately high, suggesting a greater tendency amongst seafarers to seek out astrological guidance than would perhaps have been found in the wider population (Thomas, 1971).

Although all forms of pre-reformation graffiti inscriptions remain relatively unstudied the particular phenomena of ship graffiti has been widely recognised for some time. Many examples have been identified and recorded in the UK, Ireland and around the European North Sea basin. More recently multiple examples have been recorded along the Atlantic seaboard of the Iberian

Peninsula, the eastern Mediterranean and the West Indies and Americas. However, despite these many identified and recorded examples, the phenomena of ship graffiti remains highly enigmatic. The reasons for its creation, its intended purpose, and in many cases even the date of its creation, are still the subject of some debate and remain open to multiple interpretations.

In the UK examples of ship graffiti are most commonly discovered in ecclesiastical buildings located in coastal areas. The association of ship graffiti with shoreline locations would appear obvious. However, as awareness of ship graffiti has expanded many further examples have been identified at sites a great distance from the sea or any major inland waterway. Indeed, in recent years examples have been recorded in central Leicestershire, almost as far away from the coast as is possible in mainland England. Therefore, whilst it is the case that the largest concentrations of ship graffiti yet discovered, such as those of the Glaven ports or Southampton, are located upon the coast, the phenomena is not limited solely to coastal areas (Champion, forthcoming 2015).

From the examples of ship graffiti already recorded within the UK there is a very strong argument for the creation of these inscriptions as a ritual and symbolic act. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the many dozens of examples of ship graffiti that have been recorded within the North Norfolk churches of Blakeney, Cley, Wiveton and Salthouse, only a few miles along the coast from Kings Lynn. These four churches form what is known collectively as the Glaven Port, a cluster of settlements around the mouth of the river Glaven that, during the middle ages, functioned together as a significant commercial shipping centre in East Anglia. The ship graffiti is found within all four churches, as well as elsewhere upon the coast, but that located in Blakeney church is perhaps the most significant in terms of demonstrating a possible 'meaning' for its creation.



The church of St Nicholas, Blakeney, contains in excess of forty clearly defined ship graffiti inscriptions. Intriguingly, although examples of pre-reformation inscriptions are to be found throughout the church, all the examples of ship graffiti so far recorded have been located upon the piers of the south arcade. Indeed, even within the south arcade a clear distribution pattern is evident. The arcade is formed of four large piers of high quality dressed stone. Upon the pier at the western end of the nave only three or four examples have been recorded. The next pier contains five or six examples. The third pier contains at least thirteen examples. The most easterly pier, which is located next to the side altar and opposite a now empty image niche, contains

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over twenty-five examples of ship graffiti. Furthermore, all of these examples of ship graffiti are distinctly separate from each other, with each ship inscription respecting the space of those other inscriptions around it. Where little room is available between two larger inscriptions the space has been filled with a much smaller ship graffiti. This is even more remarkable when it is understood that these individual inscriptions were created over a period of at least two centuries (Peake, 2013).

Today the Blakeney ships, like most early graffiti inscriptions, are difficult to see with the naked eye. However, at the time of their creation they would have been one of the most obvious features in the south aisle, if not the church itself. Archaeological investigation has shown that, in common with the vast majority of medieval churches, Blakeney church interior was painted and decorated in a vivid array of pigments. The piers upon which the ship graffiti are located show evidence that they were painted in a deep red ochre and that the ship graffiti were scratched through this pigment to reveal the pale stone beneath. Therefore, the ship graffiti, far from being difficult to see and hidden away, would have been viewed as a large collection of small white ships upon a deep red background (Champion, 2011). In common with other early graffiti inscriptions the Blakeney ships also show no evidence of subsequent defacement or destruction. Each inscription both respected the position of the neighbouring inscriptions, and was respected by the wider visitors to the church.

The Blakeney ship graffiti strongly suggests a ritual and symbolic element in the creation of ship graffiti. Its distinct concentration around the area of the aisle altar and the empty image niche would suggest that this location or proximity to areas deemed spiritually important within the church building was an important part of its creation. The fact that, despite being created over an extended period of time, each inscription respected previous inscriptions, and was in turn respected, would also suggest that this practise was both accepted and acceptable. This is further supported by the fact that none of the Blakeney inscriptions have suffered defacement, despite being very obvious to the casual observer, and church authorities, throughout the later middle ages and right up until the mid-sixteenth century when the church was lime-washed during the protestant reformation.

Whilst the Blakeney ship graffiti does very clearly indicate that this phenomena had both function and meaning it is still impossible to unequivocally explain exactly what that meaning or function was. It has been suggested that the empty image niche once contained a figure of St Nicholas (the churches own dedicatory saint), who functioned as patron saint 'of those in peril upon the seas' throughout much of the latter middle ages, and that these ships were 'votive offerings' to his image. The concept of ship graffiti being associated with a St Nicholas cult is supported by findings at a number of other sites; the most notable of which in the context of the Kings Lynn findings are the graffiti inscriptions in the church of St Thomas, Winchelsea, East Sussex. St Thomas' church, like Blakeney, contains a large number of early graffiti inscriptions distributed fairly evenly across what remains of the church. However, the examples of ship graffiti are all to be found on the piers of the north arcade, with a particular concentration on the most easterly pier. This pier is located directly opposite the side aisle altar, which was partitioned as a separate chapel within the main body of the church, and records indicate that this chapel was specifically dedicated to St Nicholas (Champion, forthcoming 2015).

If it is the case that certain of the ship graffiti inscriptions were linked to a cult of St Nicholas then the exact nature or the votive offering remains unclear. Where they created as thanks for a voyage safely undertaken, as prayers for a safe passage for a voyage yet to come, or as offerings for ships long overdue? With an almost complete absence of written evidence associated with their creation

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any more specific interpretation must remain as mere speculation. Nevertheless, the Blakeney, Winchelsea and Kings Lynn ship graffiti do very clearly demonstrate that these inscriptions had, at the time of their creation, a widely recognised and powerful meaning and function. Although this direct and tangible link to St Nicholas would appear clear at both Blakeney and Winchelsea it can by no means account for all examples of ship graffiti recorded to date. There are simply too many examples present at sites which have no clear St Nicholas association, and it would appear likely that, as with most types of graffiti inscription, there may well be a number of possible meanings and intended functions.

Votive Ships

The concept of ship images acting as votive offerings has long been recognised throughout Europe. The most obvious manifestation of 'votive ships' can still be seen in over 900 examples of small model ships, of various antiquity, that can be seen today exhibited in the churches of Denmark. These, often beautifully built and detailed, models were sometimes presented to the church by ships captains upon retirement, or upon the decommissioning of a vessel or, in a few recorded cases, as thanksgivings for passing through a dangerous storm by a grateful crew. These 'church ships' are not confined to Denmark and, like the ship graffiti, they are to be found as far away as Spain and Portugal and the Americas. This practice was also recorded as taking place within the UK and a number of English churches, most notably at All Hallows by the Tower in London, still exhibit several examples (Harley, 1994).

However, the earliest surviving 'church ships' are believed to be several mid-sixteenth century examples now to be found in Portugal. No earlier examples survive from the UK. However, there are a number of earlier written references that suggest that the practise was carried out in medieval England, at least as far back as the thirteenth century. In 1227 Henry III instructed that a silver model of his 'great ship' be conveyed to the Norfolk abbey of Bromholm, site of the 'Rood of Bromholm', a miracle working cross that became the site of popular pilgrimage for several centuries (Webb, 2000, p.117). Similarly, in April 1451 Thomas Fen of Groton stipulated in his will that a 'silver ship' of the value of 26s 8d was to be presented to Groton church, with another of the same value to be presented to Boxford church. Despite the generous gift of these two silver ships the rest of Fen's will indicates no obvious connection with the sea or maritime trade (Northeast, 2001, p.199). The fact that both these earlier references to the presentation

Right: a surviving votive ship dating from the late 18th century. Kokar church, Aland, Finland.



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of ship models to churches are acts of devotion, and echo the gift of the wax ship made by the Lincolnshire mariners, certainly shows clear parallels with the creation of ship graffiti found at sites such as Kings Lynn, Blakeney and Winchelsea. It would suggest that, like the votive ship models, the ship graffiti was created with devotional, and perhaps commemorative, intent and need not have been the direct creation of the mariners themselves, but simply those who had a vested interest in, or had undertaken, sea voyages. Indeed, this link between votive model ship and ship graffiti was suggested by Violet Pritchard as long ago as 1967 and might, in some interpretations, account for the presence of ship graffiti and votive ship models at sites far distant from the coastline (Pritchard, 1967).

The King's Lynn ship graffiti

The ship graffiti located in the south porch of St Nicholas chapel fits is fairly typical of the style and type of ship graffiti inscriptions found in English churches. In common with almost all other pre-reformation examples recorded to date the vessel appears to be a single masted ship, shown with sails furled and in full hull profile. The fact that the majority of ship graffiti conforms to this pattern is notable in itself, and would suggest an accepted form that was widely understood. The fact that these ships are shown as full hulls, rather than from the waterline upwards as most people would have seen them in reality, may well indicate a close relationship to the votive ship

Right: Carved bench-end from St Nicholas Chapel depicting a late medieval ship that shows striking similarities with the graffiti located in the South Porch. Victoria and Albert Museum.

Below: Seal of the town of Winchelsea, Sussex, showing a slightly earlier version of a single masted sea-going vessel, albeit with an identical style of rigging.



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models. Although there are no direct references to such votive ship models having ever been known in St Nicholas' the site is known to have once been home to one of the finest wood carved depictions of a medieval ship in England. The carving of a medieval 'cog', a type of single masted trading vessel once common in the north sea, is on the end of a late medieval stall end that is now housed in the Victoria and Albert museum. The similarities between the depiction of the ship on the carved bench end and the ship graffiti in the south porch are striking; suggesting that the porch graffiti was meant to depict the same type of vessel.

The Cog was a widely used cargo carrying vessel throughout the later Middle Ages and would have been a common sight in the medieval port of Kings Lynn. The development of the Cog has also been linked to the growth of the Hansa trading organisation, who themselves had a long association with the town, and it is likely that much of the wealth generated by the merchants of the town was done so using just such ships as that etched in to the walls of the porch. With the porch also home to at least one clearly incised merchant's mark, and in light of the chapel's history as the 'port church', it would appear likely that the ship graffiti at least referenced the trade links of the town, and those individuals who worshipped in the chapel.

Assessment of Significance/Dating

As the study of early graffiti inscriptions increases examples of ship graffiti continue to be recorded in standing structures. Although by no means common discoveries, the number of examples located to date has resulted in them being regarded as a sub-corpus of early graffiti inscriptions and, as such, they have begun to receive serious academic consideration in their own right. However, the discovery made at St Nicholas' Chapel is significant even within this limited corpus of material. In general terms the quality of execution, and detail shown, of the King's Lynn ship graffiti compares reasonably favourably with many examples recorded within UK churches. As a result of the loss and damage to areas of the stonework, and with few parallels to draw upon, any accurate dating of the graffiti must be regarded as tentative.



Left: gold coin of Edward III dated to c. 1344 showing a clear depiction of a medieval 'cog'.



However, all the ship was clearly depicted as single masted vessels with raised bow and stern sections. Whilst such images may well represent depictions of smaller inshore or riverine vessels it is also possible that they represent larger sea-going vessels of an early date. This is perhaps supported by the presence of what appears to be a 'crows nests', a feature that would not have been seen on smaller inshore craft. Indeed, the ship bears a striking similarity to contemporary depictions of the late medieval trading 'Cog' or early form of 'Carrack'. If this is the case then it is probable that the depiction dates to the period prior to c.1550. The raised bow and stern works, low waist, yard arms shrouds and external and centrally aligned rudder bear strong similarities with numerous contemporary depictions of late medieval 'cogs', such as that depicted upon the gold coin of Edward III (1344), and that shown on the roof boss from Bayonne Cathedral (c.1350-80). This type of vessel is generally considered to have been introduced in the early decades of the 14th century and was a marked technological advance upon the earlier vessels, with their external steering oars and limited cargo capacity, as depicted on the early 14th century seal of Winchelsea. The possible interpretation of the ship depicted in St Nicholas' Chapel as a 'cog' is also supported by numerous manuscript examples, such as that shown in the Shrewsbury Talbot Book of Romances (before c.1445), Lydgate's Lives of St Edmund and Fremund (c.1434-44) and Le Livres de Graunt Caam (c.1400). If such an interpretation is accepted then the most likely date for the Kings Lynn graffito would lie in the period 1350-1450. However, without further evidence, and given the degraded nature of much of the graffiti, any such attribution must remain tentative.

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