Beliefs and superstitions – medieval graffiti

In medieval England, the Church was the focus of the community and the Christian calendar central to people's social lives, in fact, religious belief permeated almost every aspect of daily life. The Guild Chapel was no different and the Guild of the Holy Cross, a religious and charitable organisation, offered members security in times of need and prayers for the salvation of the souls of the departed to speed their passage through purgatory – for a price of course!

People believed emphatically in heaven and hell and 'The Day of Judgement' or 'Doom' painting over the chancel arch in the Chapel gives a stark warning of what would happen to your soul if you did not live a good, Christian life and get to heaven! People entering the Chapel would have been in no doubt as to its message.

William Shakespeare makes numerous references to heaven and hell in his plays - Hamlet avoids killing his uncle while he is praying because, if he does, his uncle will go straight to heaven.

Making sure prayers were said for your soul and living a good, Christian life, were all ways of ensuring 'a good death'. Part of being a good Christian entailed doing 'good works' and it is thanks to the civic pietism of the wealthy benefactor Hugh Clopton (1440-1496) that the Chapel's nave, tower and porch were built in stone and the walls painted. His will contains instructions for their completion in addition to the usual pious bequests to the poor and needy, and other good causes.

Not everyone could afford to be memorialised or leave their mark in the way Hugh Clopton did, however, and in medieval times people would often carve symbols or pictures into the stone and woodwork of churches; the Chapel has a variety of such marks. This graffiti shines a small light into the lives and beliefs of those more
ordinary members of the congregation whose existence would otherwise go unrecorded and disappear into the mists of time.

Although often difficult to see today, graffiti would have been highly visible in medieval times when it was a recognised and tolerated part of religious life. It was only in the Victorian era that graffiti came to be seen as something undesirable.

Some of the marks in the Chapel – those with distinctive, neatly cut straight lines - were made by stone masons so likely date from when the Chapel was rebuilt in stone in the 1490s. These individual marks were a kind of signature, a form of quality control enabling masons to be paid.

Other marks in the Chapel are thought to be apotropaic, in other words, ritual protection marks or ‘witches’ marks’ regarded as providing protection from evil spirits for whoever created them or for the area or object onto which they were carved. In medieval times, most people believed in witches and evil spirits and blamed bad luck and misfortune on them. The Chapel walls were painted at a time when the European ‘witch-craze’ was starting to escalate, a time when women, and men, were frequently executed for being witches. In England, The Witchcraft Act, which made it legal to kill witches, was passed in 1563, the same year the wall-paintings were first white-washed and a year before Shakespeare was born. Audiences would have taken the witches scenes in Shakespeare’s play, Macbeth, very seriously.

The Church encouraged people’s belief in the power of these symbols thus graffiti augmented the Church’s orthodox teachings, providing additional protection against the evil spirits that medieval people saw everywhere and in everything. Below is just a small selection of the graffiti found in the Chapel so far.

The ‘VV’ sign is one of the most common apotropaic symbols and has been found throughout the Chapel. Traditionally thought to be an abbreviation of Virgo Virginum (Latin for Virgin of Virgins), it calls on the Virgin Mary for protection. Recent research suggests the ritual origins of the symbol might actually lie in Scandinavia as the sign appears in runic writing systems.
Turned upside down, the ‘VV’ symbol looks like a capital ‘M’, so another reference to the Virgin Mary. The number of Marian symbols found in the Chapel is perhaps not surprising as the Guild of the Holy Cross was formally associated with the Guild of the Blessed Virgin Mary (together with the Guild of John the Baptist) in 1429.

‘Witches’ marks’ were often etched onto doorways, windows and archways through which, it was thought, evil spirits were most likely to come and it is in these areas in the Chapel that most have been found.

Unsurprisingly, the cross is one of the most common ritual protection marks. They could be plain, barely more than simple scratches in the stone like the one aside, or they could be deeper and much more complicated. There is a cluster of lightly inscribed crosses around the south door in the nave, where crosses are often found, and some on the chancel arch. They were also common in church porches.

Although the stonework in the interior of the Chapel’s porch is now very damaged, it is still possible to see the deeply carved crosses there. Porches had greater importance in medieval times: some services were held there and they also had an administrative purpose so documents were signed there too. These crosses may have been made in the hope that they would give a spiritual endorsement to those transactions.

‘Witches’ marks’ did not just reflect the mainstream beliefs of the medieval Church, they also drew on more ancient myths and superstitions. Compass wheels (also known as daisy wheels or hexfoils) have pre-Christian origins and could be simple circles or complicated geometric designs. There is evidence of compass wheels both in the porch and the south west corner of the Chapel. Below is a picture of a compass wheel on the door surround of the south door in the nave.
It was thought evil spirits were attracted by lines and once they were drawn into a compass wheel, whose lines were never-ending, they were trapped forever, thus compass wheels protected the area where they were carved. This idea can also be seen in the circular windows and tracery of many medieval churches.

Image courtesy of Terry Galvin

Ritual protection symbols were not only carved into the surfaces of churches, they began to appear in domestic buildings too. These daisy wheels were carved into the timbers at the top of the staircase leading to the cellar in Shakespeare's Birthplace sometime around the 1600s, probably to protect the contents of the cellar from evil spirits.

Image courtesy (c) Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
(Available at https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/witch-markings-magic-old-buildings/)

This zigzag symbol, on the archway in the west wall of the Chapel, is understood to be a lightning strike, thought to defend against lightning which people believed to be the work of the devil. Its location might be significant as this archway leads to the bell tower and consecrated bells were ritualistically rung during thunderstorms to ward off the evil spirits causing it. Lightning could be devastating in the days of thatched roofs and timber framed buildings!

Image courtesy of Terry Galvin

After the Reformation

As it did all over England, the Reformation brought changes to the Chapel and also its graffiti. Like the wall paintings, many symbols came to be seen as superstitious. Some survived, the ‘VV’, for example, persisted even if it slowly lost much of its original meaning and became more a ‘good luck’ symbol. Dates began to appear and graffiti gradually became more secular. People started carving more personal, territorial memorials, perhaps wanting to record their visit or remember someone who had died.
The small ‘house-plaques’ are the most noticeable and common type of post-Reformation graffiti, so-called because they are typically shaped like little houses with pointed roofs, often with a cross on top, and nearly always have a date and initials.

This ‘house-plaque’ is on the chancel arch. They are often found grouped together and there is a much larger, more complex, house-plaque nearby. The earliest house-plaques tend to date from the mid-sixteenth century and their presence in the Chapel suggest it was being used again after a period of near redundancy following the dissolution of the Guild in 1547.

This graffito is a cross between a house-plaque and a shield. The initials appear to be ‘HE’ with a date in the 1600s. It is a complicated design so a lot of thought and care has gone into producing it. Maybe someone was commemorating a visit – a kind of ‘I was here’ - or it is a memorial for someone who has died? These little memorial plaques certainly seem to correspond to a time when gravestones and wall-mounted monuments start to appear.

Interestingly, whoever carved it used a ‘mesh’ design which was thought to offer spiritual protection in medieval times. While the meaning of graffiti can change depending on the context of the inscriber, it could suggest people continued to believe in the ‘magic’, or at least the ‘good luck’, of such markings well into the seventeenth century. Similar engravings elsewhere have also had this ‘mesh’ design incorporated into them so it is not unique to the Guild Chapel.
There is a profusion of names and initials in the Chapel although few are dated and it is almost impossible to know exactly how old most of them are. This is a rare example in the Chapel of initials that are dated and, although it is difficult to read, it appears to say ‘MW 1731’

Image courtesy of Terry Galvin

It is not surprising there are so many initials carved into the stone in the Chapel as it has been used for more than just devotional purposes. In Shakespeare’s time, it is thought it was also used for the petty school, attended by both boys and girls from the age of five, before the boys progressed to the grammar school next door aged seven, the school Shakespeare attended. Since 1902, the School has held its daily assemblies here so undoubtedly many of the initials will be relatively recent. Even so, with the letter ‘W’ appearing so often – William was a popular name - it is tempting to imagine a young William Shakespeare carving his initial!

There is clearly an enduring need for humans to leave their mark in some way, and it is through graffiti that we catch a glimpse of those more ordinary people who have used the Chapel over hundreds of years and can imagine the lives they led. Who do you think carved the graffiti in the chapel and what were their stories? What would you draw and why?

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References and recommended reading: