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A Special Class of Prisoner: Graffiti at Winchester's Westgate

By Claire Woodhead, Principal Conservator, Hampshire Cultural Trust

“Westgate at Winchester has a number of interesting graffiti, including names of prisoners who were confined there, and an inscription dated 1597. It is to be hoped that these will be published.”¹ So remarked Violet Pritchard, one of the early pioneers of graffiti analysis, in 1967 -- yet the graffiti at Westgate have since remained an undocumented, unpublished resource.² While Pritchard's source remains unknown, Westgate staff and local people have long considered the graffiti to be linked to debtor prisoners.

Westgate (**fig. 1**), a museum since 1878,³ is one of the few surviving parts of Winchester's city wall defences. Its core is considered 11th or 12th century,⁴ but the current structure dates mainly from the 14th century,⁵ serving mainly as defensive gatehouse and convenient prison⁶ until the principal chamber became a clubroom for the once-adjointing “Plume of Feathers”⁷ public house in the mid-18th century. At this time, the chamber was plastered (though little remains),⁸ providing a likely cut-off point for inscriptions on the stonework. Since the earliest dated inscription is from 1597, the existing graffiti is believed to date largely from the mid-16th to the mid-18th century. Although the largest graffito, a royal

¹ V. Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 172.

² A group of digitized black and white photographs (WINCM: PWCM76 to 95) of the graffiti, taken in the mid-20th century, exists as part of the collection of Winchester City Council/Hampshire Cultural Trust, but they lack any record of location or possible interpretation. The images can be viewed on the MODES (Museum Object Data Entry System) Complete database operated by Hampshire Cultural Trust.

³ F. Cottrill, *The Westgate Winchester: Notes on the building and its contents* (Winchester, 1950), p. 1.

⁴ Winchester City Council/Winchester Museums Service, *The Westgate Winchester* (Winchester, 1997).

⁵ T. Beaumont James, *Winchester - From Prehistory to the Present* (Stroud, 2007), p. 93.

⁶ D. Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester* vol. I (Oxford, 1985), p. 83.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Cottrill, *op. cit.*, p.1.

coat of arms (**fig. 2**) occupying the window splay on the west wall (possibly inscribed by Royalist soldiers during the Civil War)⁹ questions the assumption that prisoners were



Figure 1 The Westgate, Winchester, viewed from the west. Photo: author

responsible for all the graffiti, a large proportion of inscriptions can still be linked to the period in which the chamber served as a prison, and consequently, to the prisoners.

Of numerous mentions of Westgate in local guide books and academic works, none focus extensively on the building's use as a debtors' prison.¹⁰ Winchester's Court of Record is likely to have handled debt cases,¹¹ but records¹² provide no indication of where debtors

⁹ Patrick Craze, Visitor Services Assistant at the Westgate Museum, personal communication, 14 March 2015. A. Rosen, *Winchester in Transition, 1580-1700* (undated, no publishing details, Hampshire Record Office (HRO) Dewey number H942.2735), p. 65. It is thought that Westgate was garrisoned during the Civil War, forming part of the castle defences on the north and west side of the city.

¹⁰ Even Milner's roughly contemporary survey makes only a passing reference to the Westgate's "dungeon." J. Milner, *The History and Survey of the Antiquities of Winchester* (Winchester, 1798–1809), p. 210, footnote b.

¹¹ T. Atkinson, *Elizabethan Winchester* (London, 1963), p. 161.

¹² HRO: W/D1/96, City Court record book 1651-1661. HRO: W/D1/100, City Court record book 1728-1750.

Figure 2 Coat of arms inscribed onto west window surround, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.



were held. Atkinson's work on the Elizabethan city does make reference to Henry Haywood, committed to Westgate for debt in 1580,¹³ which appears to be the earliest published record of a debtor's name. More informative, but less accessible, are the unpublished 19th-century scrapbooks of W. Jacob, containing salvaged and disassociated early municipal documents.

¹³ Atkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

Volume eight¹⁴ contains the 1727 petition of debtor Joseph Shelley, written while imprisoned at Westgate. Also present is a receipt from 1751, made out to Thomas Baynes, recording “Ten pounds in full for a years sallary for keeping [th]e City prisnors committed to my Custody for debt”¹⁵ -- the Baynes family held the lease to Westgate in 1738.¹⁶ A document of 1752 hints at subsequent closure, referring to “the late prison called Westgate.”¹⁷

Such fragments of archival evidence are scarce, but lend authenticity to popular stories and beliefs. It remains apparent, however, that the local system for debtor imprisonment at Westgate has never been explored.

A Culture of Debt

By the 18th century, debt in England, already “a major problem for several hundred years,”¹⁸ was perhaps at its peak. The English economy was heavily dependent, as it still is, on a system of credit.¹⁹ Borrowing and lending were extensive; May’s investigation into Winchester’s 1733 probate inventories reveals a local case in which “no fewer than forty-four individuals” owed debts to just one man.²⁰ At this time, legal civil procedure for regaining debts could be begun if a debtor owed more than forty shillings²¹. It was possible to avoid capture indefinitely,²² but many ended up imprisoned for negligible amounts, subject to the “malice and ire” of creditors who “pulled the levers of state power.”²³

¹⁴ HRO: W/K5/8, scrapbook “A Retrospect of Civic Manners and Customs Elizabeth 1576 to Victoria 1888” compiled by Alderman W.H. Jacob in 1888 (in two parts - includes index to scrapbook).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁷ W.A. Jacob, “The Westgate, Winchester,” *Hampshire Chronicle*, undated (late 19th century). Jacob refers to the 1752 document in his article. From HRO Information Pack: Winchester Buildings 2, ‘Westgate’ folder.

¹⁸ R.B. Pugh, *Imprisonment in Medieval England* (London, 1968), p. 28.

¹⁹ J. Innes, “The King’s Bench prison in the later eighteenth century: law, authority and order in a London debtors’ prison” in J. Brewer and J. Styles. (eds.), *An Ungovernable People - the English and their law in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (London, 1980), p. 252.

²⁰ M.R. May, *Winchester Houses and People c.1650-1710: A Study Based on Probate Inventory Evidence* (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 1998), p.150.

²¹ Innes, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 256.

²³ S. McConville, “Local Justice: The Jail” in N. Morris and D. Rothman (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (Oxford, 1998), p. 271.

Pervasive credit culture put the prison system under serious strain.²⁴ The inconsistencies of imprisonment for debt have been well observed by others,²⁵ and while their examination is not the purpose of this paper, some context is important. Debtors nationally fell broadly into two camps: those who retained their wealth and those who were genuinely penniless. Some chose jail in preference to paying a debt,²⁶ conducting business -- even leaving the jail to do so²⁷ -- rising to the top of the prisoner hierarchy and enjoying a relatively comfortable standard of living. These debtors frustrated their creditors, who saw prison as “a haven for the spendthrift.”²⁸

Shelley's 1727 petition suggests a rather less prosperous time as a Westgate debtor. His petition, though likely prone to exaggeration, is worth sharing in full:

Humbley begs leave to lay befor your Worshipp, the misery and hardship that I now undergoe in the said Gole of Westgate and have Endured this for above too months parste.

Humbley sheweth that your Peticioner has nothing left in the world to Suporte him nor that your Peticioner has not a frend that is able to helpe him and your Peticioner has solde that small mater which he Had to Suporte him, all exsept too peases of Clockwork Unfinished, which I Humbley begg that your worshipp will be pleased to Grante me liberty, of having my tools broate into [th]e Gate, that I may finish, the too peases of work, when sold will Raise as mutch money as I am now confined for, your Peticioner Hubley beg that you will be pleased to Consider the Hardshipp which I labor under, for I have no Bead to lay on, nor has my Close bin of my back for 59 nites, and what is yett wors[e] I have neither money, no vitells to Eate, nor can I Gitt a dropp of water, butt what I am forsed, to beg of Som Bodey that Pases by, for I have nott seen aney of [th]e sargants this six weeks, nor can I Gitt someitch as a Quarte botel unto [th]e Prison this I beg you will be please to Consider, for without some timely Release I must of nesety Perish And in duty bound shall for ever pray for you

To this Honorable Benth
The Petichon of Jo[seph] Shelley
Clockmaker

²⁴ J.E. Thomas, *House of care: prisons and prisoners in England 1500-1800* (Nottingham, 1988), 69.

²⁵ Innes, *op. cit.*, Thomas, *op. cit.*, P. Woodfine, “Debtors, Prisons and Petitions in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Spring 2006).

²⁶ Innes, *op. cit.*, p. 256. S. McConville, “Local Justice: The Jail” in N. Morris and D.J. Rothman (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (Oxford, 1998), p. 271.

²⁷ J. Bellamy, *Crime and Public Order in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1973), p. 177. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²⁸ Innes, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

The petition perhaps supports theories that debtors were, on the whole, civilized, intelligent, and literate, a special class of prisoner²⁹ with a strong sense of good moral conduct.³⁰ There was a general acceptance that such prisoners should be separated from felons,³¹ and this was apparently the case at Westgate, where the “upper chamber” housed “gentlemen debtors...in relative comfort” compared to the “less fortunate commoners.”³² The problem remained that however moral or literate, penniless debtors could be in real trouble, their plights ranging from “unpleasant to desperate,”³³ with starvation a likely prospect.³⁴ Adding to their woes was a constant fear of disease, with epidemics serving as “a second form of jail delivery.”³⁵

The graffiti study – methodology

Frames of reference shift, even from the relatively recent past,³⁶ rendering a level of subjectivity in graffiti interpretation unavoidable even in those who are aware of the dangers. For this reason, methods of recording and documentation require objectivity, to help rather than hinder any future insights.

The majority of examples in the Westgate main chamber (to which study is limited) are not of paint or pigment,³⁷ but carved into the softer stone surrounds of doors and windows. All were recorded, without bias towards marks of a particular date, type, skill, or perceived intent. Locations of graffiti, relative to benchmarks around the interior of the building and to the floor, were mapped. The number of individual graffiti was estimated, as were incidences of lettered, pictorial, or indistinct marks. All accessible graffiti were captured

²⁹ Pugh, *op. cit.*, p. 334, Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

³⁰ Innes, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

³¹ R. McGowen, “The Well-Ordered Prison: England, 1780-1865” in N. Morris and D.J. Rothman (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society* (Oxford, 1998), p.71.

³² Winchester City Council/Winchester Museums Service, *op. cit.*

³³ Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

³⁴ Bellamy, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

³⁵ McConville, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

³⁶ J. Baird and C. Taylor, “Ancient Graffiti in Context: Introduction,” *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (London, 2011), p. 6.

³⁷ R. Reisner, *Graffiti: Two thousand years of wall writing* (New York, 1971), p. 36.

by color photography with scale, and where necessary with raking light. Some additional experimentation with Reflectance Transformation Imaging was undertaken, but while RTI has been used with great success in similar graffiti surveys,³⁸ at the Westgate its use was fairly limited and yielded no additional information. A total audit of the graffiti in the chamber could not be achieved due to building fixtures, but may be possible in the future.

Identity and community

The vast majority of inscriptions at Westgate are of names, dates, and particularly, initials. The prevalence of such marks is not unusual in a prison setting,³⁹ or indeed, in general.⁴⁰ At the Tower of London there are said to be 300 plus examples of graffiti;⁴¹ from the Reformation period, the majority consist “of prisoners’ names and initials.”⁴² Dated examples at Westgate proliferate during the mid-17th to early-18th centuries, likely representing a proportional increase of graffitists confined during a period in which Winchester was a thriving hub for the arrangement of credit and the necessary debt this entailed.⁴³ It also reflects, on a local scale, the national increase in debtor prisoners.⁴⁴

The Westgate walls bear witness to Jhon Coper of Worthy, [P]hillip [?]arsell, W. Bagg, John Heridg, H.N. Weare, Richard Hemet, Thomas Strond, Eamon Becam, I/J. Simpson, John Lampar and John Burton. There is also a less legible John B[?][?]s, and the rather unusual “Pparndy Broadmay.” (**fig. 3**) Sadly, even with full names – and particularly given they are not all dated -- it would take an inordinate amount of time to locate these individuals in the records (assuming they are there) or to confirm debtor status. Despite the

³⁸ L. McAtackney and G. Devlin, “Recovering Revolutionary Ireland,” *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 28, no. 2 (Summer 2014), p. 34.

³⁹ E. Conlin Casella, “Prisoner of His Majesty: Postcoloniality and the Archaeology of British Penal Transportation,” *World Archaeology*, vol. 37, no. 3, Historical Archaeology (September 2005), p. 458. The leaving of names and initials was identified as a theme at Cork City Jail.

⁴⁰ Reisner, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁴¹ R. Ahnert, “Writing in the Tower of London during the Reformation, ca. 1530-1558,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 2 (June 2009), p. 172.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴³ A. Rosen, *Winchester in Transition, 1580-1700* (undated, no publishing details, HRO Dewey number H942.2735), p. 178.

⁴⁴ Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 69.



Figure 3 One of two inscriptions apparently reading “Pparndy Broadmay,” the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

odds, however, John Burton does appear in the City Court records, and his contribution to the graffiti will be discussed shortly.

It has been suggested that the inscription of initials or a first name alone merely indicates a casual effort, or doodle.⁴⁵ Reisner terms it the “‘I was here’ syndrome”; a human urge “endemic through the centuries.”⁴⁶ Ahnert goes further, asserting that such marks, though basic, “provide the prisoner with a defense against obscurity.”⁴⁷ During a time when Winchester city itself was under threat from the effects of war⁴⁸ and pestilence,⁴⁹ a debtor prisoner of the Westgate may have found an already bleak situation magnified. Their graffiti

⁴⁵ Reisner, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁷ Ahnert, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁴⁸ Beaumont James, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁴⁹ Atkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 210.



Figure 4 A boxed cluster of initials, likely contemporary with one another, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

may reflect desperation or defiance in the face of a pauper's grave, the permanence of the stone providing an eternal memorial.⁵⁰

Where individuals are represented, so is the debtor community. Although accumulations of names and initials might be considered superficial tagging, when viewed in the context of Westgate's history and contemporary audience, these independent expressions may be perceived as one voice: the graffitists were "spokesmen not only for themselves but

⁵⁰ A. Chaniotis, "Graffiti in Aphrodisias: Images – Texts – Contexts" in J.A. Baird, and C. Taylor (eds.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (London, 2011), p. 205.

for others like them.”⁵¹ Moreover, often one inscription will naturally encourage another and so establish a pattern, perhaps over hundreds of years.⁵² Rather than responding to a base urge to upstage or replace an existing mark, a graffitist may be “integrating themselves into and extending the corpus of names already there.”⁵³ The act of inscribing a name consciously links that name to prisoners of past and future, affording a sense of belonging, and acknowledging a shared situation. Clusters of initials (**fig. 4**) may even evidence the creation of contemporary relationships amongst Westgate’s debtors, as shown by similar studies in Yorkshire⁵⁴ and at the Tower of London,⁵⁵ where negotiation of hierarchy and bonds of loyalty are implicit in the graffiti. The manner and style of some inscriptions at the Westgate suggest that certain initials are contemporaneous. It may be inferred that the prisoners experienced real fellowship and community, not just a shared situation and virtual bond, creating not only personal memorials, but “social memories”⁵⁶ through their inscriptions. Furthermore, it may provide evidence that the chamber was not just used to confine individuals.

Literacy and culture

One inscription (**fig. 5**), though anonymous, shows a high level of literacy, perhaps even an intention to enlighten or provoke reflection. It may fit the category of graffiti identified by Ahnert at the Tower of London, in which wise or religious statements share “truths already written,” with the reader.⁵⁷

Between neatly ruled guidelines (apparently to take a much longer inscription than was ever completed) is the declaration “HE THAT KEEPS HIS HOAM MAY.” The next two

⁵¹ Reisner, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵³ Ahnert, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁵⁴ K. Giles and M. Giles, “The Writing on the Wall: The Concealed Communities of the East Yorkshire Horselads,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, vol.11, no. 4 (2007), p. 337.

⁵⁵ Ahnert, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁵⁶ C. Taylor, “Graffiti and the Epigraphic Habit: Creating Communities and Writing Alternate Histories in Classical Attica” in J.A. Baird and C. Taylor (eds.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (London, 2011), p. 97.

⁵⁷ Ahnert, *op. cit.*, p. 175.



Figure 5 ‘He that keeps his hoam may...’ graffiti, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

letters are indefinable, as is smaller lettering on the lines beneath, which seems in a different hand. Such “He that ...” sayings were common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,⁵⁸ and are reminiscent of biblical proverbs, though an exact parallel was not found.

Interestingly, a similar saying is found in Shakespeare. In Act three, scene three of *Timon of Athens* (a tragedy concerning a man who vastly outspends his means – in effect, a debtor), a servant proclaims “Who cannot keep his wealth must keep his house.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ M.P. Tilley, *The Proverbs in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Michigan, 1950), *passim*.

⁵⁹ W. Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens*, script to full play accessed at <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/timon/full.html>

While only one example amongst a sea of names and initials, this graffito fits the theory that the eighteenth century inspired graffiti of a much higher literary quality than the preceding century.⁶⁰ Reisner suggests this may be due to the fashion for discussing popular literary works of the day, including Shakespeare, whose verses “filtered down to the common people of...the city streets.”⁶¹ If *Timon of Athens* had become part of the popular media of its day, it is tempting to imagine the graffitist, identifying with the story of Timon, planning a witty (if rueful) play on words – he that kept his home may have lost his wealth. This mark could represent an attempt to engage the audience with a statement of a philosophical or reflective nature, placing the graffitist, likely a debtor prisoner, on a cultural level with Ahnert’s religious and political prisoners.⁶²



Figure 6 John Burton’s inscription on the floorboards of the Westgate chamber, Winchester. Photo: author.

⁶⁰ Reisner, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Reisner, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

Trade and business

Alongside lettered inscriptions, Westgate has a number of pictorial images, wherein clues to the businesses of Winchester's debtors may lie. Though merchants' or guild marks⁶³ are not obvious, various trades, and pride in those trades, may be represented by carvings of agricultural tools, a pair of dividers, open scissors or shears, a square-toed boot, and a glove. It is John Burton – surprisingly located in the City Court records – who contributes one of the more elaborate examples (**fig. 6**), in a mark that is considered to provide the first proven connection between debtors at Westgate and the graffiti. City Court records of November 3rd 1738⁶⁴ record John's custody on a charge of trespass – he was in debt to a William Abree. Yet John seems to have been in custody for six months or more already; dated May 1, 1738, his inscription provides an insight into the minimum length of term served. John's graffito depicts the sole of square-toed boot and pair of hands, one apparently protected by a leatherworker's "palm" (a leather cuff with lead insert), highly likely to represent his trade. A brief and impersonal glimpse of John Burton is all that can be gained from the historic record, but his graffito represents his own voice.

An inscription reading "For Father" on the west wall (**fig. 7**) perhaps indicates some of the practicalities of business, debt, and prison use during the period. The popular story behind this graffito is that a son was imprisoned as surety for his father's debt.⁶⁵ Was the father perhaps in a greater position to continue the business and so pay off the debt, or the son more capable of withstanding the anticipated hardships? No further evidence has been found for the claim, but if true it perhaps supports the theory that imprisonment for debt could be a

⁶³ M. Champion, *Medieval Graffiti* (London, 2015), p. 133, 136.

⁶⁴ HRO: W/D1/100, City Court record book 1728-1750.

⁶⁵ Winchester City Council, "Westgate and Great Hall," *Winchester Trail Information Spotters Pack* (Winchester, 1983).



Figure 7 “For Father” – keeping a family business afloat? Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

business solution; a situation over which the debtor had some control, and to which little stigma was attached.⁶⁶

Religion and Faith

Although the positioning of the graffiti within the chamber provides no clue to internal layout, the location of certain examples merits consideration. Several crosses are inscribed on the east wall, near a window overlooking the city (**fig. 8**). There is also a small, plain, depiction of a chalice, perhaps representative of Christian Holy Communion. From the east windows, before the introduction of modern buildings, the cathedral was undoubtedly visible – enhancing the significance of the east wall for Christian motifs. While Christianity has no monopoly over use of the cross symbol, and a (well-drawn) chalice elsewhere has

⁶⁶ McConville, *op. cit.*, p. 278.



Figure 8 A large cross with the inscription “I.N 1722”, on the east wall, looking towards the cathedral. Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

been considered a representation of the silversmith or metalworking trade,⁶⁷ the context presents a strong argument that these examples represent Christian devotion and belief.

For prisoners at the Tower of London, the inscription of religious devices has been said to create “a space in which they practiced their faith,”⁶⁸ and though a different type of prisoner is represented at Westgate, the idea may still apply. Prison becomes

not only a place of confinement, but a place for reflection.

Further evidence of faith may be found in the Westgate’s three examples of ship carvings. The simple, curved form of an example on the west wall (**fig. 9**) may suggest a clinker-built hulk, used for trading around Britain between the 11th and 16th centuries.⁶⁹ However, the surrounding dots and initials suggest the intention behind this stylized boat form may have been decorative rather than illustrative. Two further examples, by contrast,

⁶⁷ Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 151

⁶⁸ Ahnert, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

⁶⁹ K. Brady and C. Corlett, “Holy Ships: Ships on Plaster at Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites in Ireland,” *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer 2004), p. 29.



Figure 9 Simple depiction of a boat, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

are by graffitists more concerned with representation. The first, a single-masted example on the north wall near the fireplace (**fig. 10**), features detailed planking and rigging, and even a small Union Jack. While somewhat generic, the image undeniably depicts a ship rather than an abstract boat. The second example (**fig. 11**), on the west wall, differs again. This ship has three masts, the rigging is present, but sails appear furled, and the stern is built up to a higher level than the prow. It may be likened to a Dutch vessel known as a *fluyt*; spacious, fast, “the classic merchant ship of the 17th century.”⁷⁰ This appears to be the work of someone well-

⁷⁰ B. Lavery, *Ship: 5000 Years of Maritime Adventure* (London, 2004), p. 154.



Figure 10 Image of a ship, complete with union jack, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

acquainted with such vessels, perhaps a shipwright, or given Winchester's location, a merchant trader.

Ship carvings are a well-known phenomenon. In 1968, Pritchard suggested that images of ships among the churches of Cambridgeshire and its surrounds were likely the result of seafaring and trade associations,⁷¹ or possibly “substitutes for votive models.”⁷² Brady and Corlett, while acknowledging an association between ship imagery and merchant

⁷¹ Pritchard, *op. cit.*, pp.123-125, 131-132, 140.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 133.



Figure 11 Detailed ship carving reminiscent of a Dutch “fluyt,” the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

wealth, or maritime patronage,⁷³ consider that the prevalence of such imagery at ecclesiastical sites indicate devotional intent. Ship images, they maintain, not only depict the action of pilgrimage but represent “salvation of the soul,”⁷⁴ wherein the ship embodies the church and offers, “like the Ark,”⁷⁵ a Christian haven. Current opinion is that these ships, particularly in ecclesiastical contexts, are indeed intended as Christian protective symbols. Ship etchings at Norwich Cathedral⁷⁶ and at Blakeney church,⁷⁷ revealed through the Norfolk

⁷³ Brady and Corlett, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Anon., “Ecclesiastical Etchings,” *Current Archaeology*, issue 277 (April 2013), p. 9.

⁷⁷ M. Champion, “Reading the Writing on the Wall – The Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey,” *Current Archaeology*, issue 256 (July 2011), pp. 36-41.

Medieval Graffiti Survey, have been described as “devotional symbols for giving thanks for a safe voyage or representing prayers for a journey yet to come.”⁷⁸ It is suggested the care taken over these inscriptions indicates a form of “hands-on” prayer, undertaken as part of normal worship.⁷⁹

Incidences of ship carving highlight the importance of viewing graffiti in the context both of the building they are housed in, and the hand that created them. The ecclesiastical ships of Norfolk and Ireland may well be interpreted as protective, devotional symbols, however ships carved on the walls of Irish jails holding prisoners bound for Australia are more obviously, as Conlin Casella states, reflections on a journey far from home.⁸⁰ Context suggests it is unlikely that any of the ship images in Westgate’s main chamber fall into the category of transportation graffiti, and that they are more likely intended to give protection during a troubled time, although it should be acknowledged that rooms beneath the main chamber -- still in use as a jail in the later 18th century -- may well have held candidates for transportation.⁸¹ There is also a possibility (given the non-ecclesiastical nature of the building) that the more elaborate depictions may offer clues to trade or occupation.

The use of protective devices at Westgate continues. Of the large number of single initials present, “W” is the most common, making twenty-four appearances – nearly twice as many as the next most common initial, “A.” Though it may represent a common name such as William, there is another persuasive explanation. During the 17th century, when “fear of witches was at its height,”⁸² a variety of marks (commonly termed “apotropaic”) were considered protective. Crossed or interlocking Vs were popular as a representation of Mary, “Virgin of Virgins,”⁸³ interlocking Ms (for Mary) and saltire crosses -- also present at

⁷⁸ Anon., *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Conlin Casella, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

⁸¹ M. Spence, “Hampshire and Australia, 1783-1791 Crime and Transportation,” *Hampshire Papers*, issue 2, (December 1992), p. 8.

⁸² E. Roberts, *Hampshire Houses 1250-1700: Their Dating and Development* (Southampton, 2003), p. 100.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.



Figure 12 Carefully formed letter “W,” likely intended as an initial, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

Westgate -- were thought to provide the same protection.⁸⁴ The level of care taken over the Westgate examples may provide a clue to their meaning. While a neat W (**fig. 12**), with serifs, could reasonably be assumed to be an initial rather than a symbol, the

many hastily inscribed examples (**figs. 13, 14**) may have been created with a view to effectiveness rather than aesthetic appeal. Such marks may also be identified by their proximity to doors, windows and fireplaces, considered likely portals for evil spirits.⁸⁵

Figurative representations

Westgate’s lack of figurative representations is in contrast with the numbers apparently encountered at ecclesiastical sites. Such examples, often clothed with conveniently dateable apparel, may represent famous figures, royalty, customs, or myths.⁸⁶ It

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Pritchard, *op. cit.*, *passim*. D. Jones Baker, “The Graffiti of Folk Motifs in Cotswold Churches,” *Folklore*, vol. 92, no. 2 (1981), pp. 161-164.

Figure 13 A hastily inscribed “W” (or crossed Vs) near a window, likely intended as protection from evil spirits. The Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

has been suggested that much representational graffiti relies on something to copy from or provide inspiration,⁸⁷ so perhaps it is not unusual that there are no such detailed examples in a bleak prison environment. That the only existing example is inscribed into later (clubroom) plasterwork underlines this. The example, referred to in the



1950's by Westgate's curator as a facial "caricature," accompanies the name "Thomas Strond."⁸⁸ Viewed today, the graffito is only partially detectable (**fig. 15**), but a contemporary photograph⁸⁹ (**fig. 16**) of the inscription shows clear detail which no longer exists. This graffito has significantly deteriorated over the last half century – highlighting the risk of loss, and the value of photographic recording.

⁸⁷ Jones Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

⁸⁸ Cottrill, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁸⁹ WINCM: PWCM94, one of a group of digitized black-and-white photographs taken in the mid-20th century of graffiti at the Westgate, viewed on MODES (Museum Object Data Entry System) Complete database operated by Hampshire Cultural Trust.



Figure 14 Another example of crossed Vs, again near a window and likely intended as a protective marking, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.

Censorship

Reisner suggests that prisoners inscribe graffiti as a psychological release mechanism; an act “symbolic...of getting out.”⁹⁰ He cites Freud’s observation that humor can “offset” pain in support of his theory that humorous, often rude, graffiti are a common outlet for frustrated prisoners. Certainly, rude, aggressive carvings dominate other historic prison

⁹⁰ *Reisner, op. cit.*, p. 6.



Figure 15 Caricature of a head and the name “Thomas Strond,” today highly deteriorated, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.



Figure 16 “Thomas Strond” and the caricature as it appeared in the mid-20th century, the Westgate, Winchester. Photo: WINCM: PWCM94, copyright Hampshire Cultural Trust.

graffiti assemblages.⁹¹ The surviving graffiti at Westgate, however, seem to lack any such examples. Though blank, chiselled squares, abraded patches (possibly a modern cleaning

⁹¹ J.Z. Wilson, “Pecking orders: Power relationships and gender in Australian prison graffiti,” *Ethnography*, vol. 9, no. 1 (March 2008), p. 101.

attempt) and violent scratching out (**figs. 17 – 19**) are all present at Westgate, suggesting possible censorship, they number very few, perhaps merely representing the preparation of an area to receive fresh graffiti.

While Reisner declares that the inscribed thoughts of the common prisoner are “as a rule not much above the level of...his navel,”⁹² he makes a distinction between such prisoners and those incarcerated for religious or political reasons, from whom graffiti of a more respectable nature is expected. Once again it is this class with which the debtor prisoners seem aligned.

Figure 17 Is this chiselled square an act of censorship? The Westgate, Winchester. Photo: author.



⁹² Reisner, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

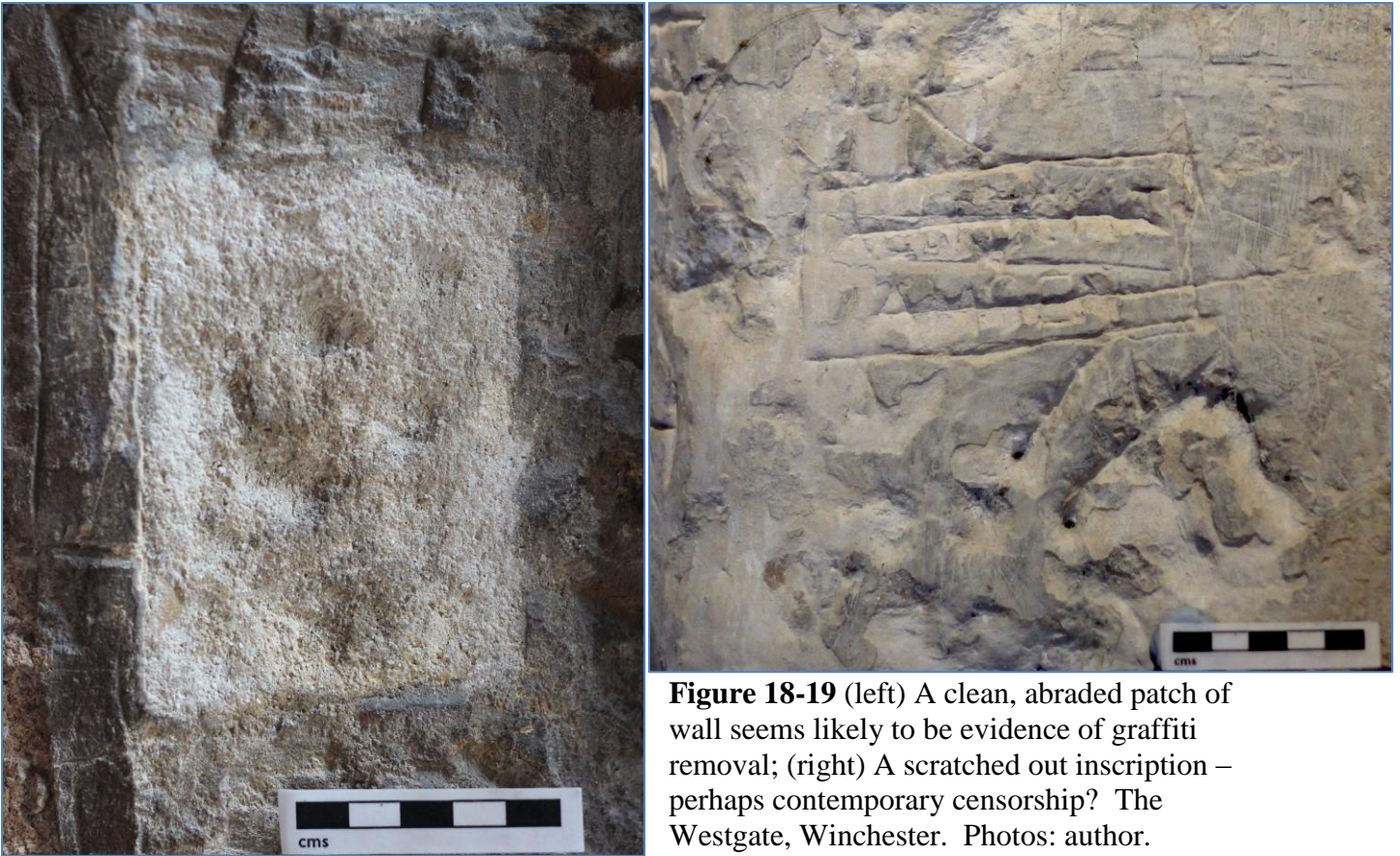


Figure 18-19 (left) A clean, abraded patch of wall seems likely to be evidence of graffiti removal; (right) A scratched out inscription – perhaps contemporary censorship? The Westgate, Winchester. Photos: author.

Conclusion

Through extended study of primary documentation, it has been possible, perhaps for the first time, to directly link a debtor in the City Court records with the graffiti at Westgate, thus proving the oral tradition perpetuated by museum staff and displays. Study of the Westgate graffiti shows the majority of dated inscriptions to be contemporary with the time period in which an increase in debtor prisoners might be expected. The prevalence of carved initials and names provide evidence for a virtual debtor community, representing debtor solidarity both between contemporaries and between those separated by many years. While the identification of each named individual in the historic record from the inscriptions is an unrealistic prospect, inferences can be made about the nature of Westgate's debtor prisoners. Baird and Taylor have considered whether graffiti produced by certain "types" conform to "set patterns and rules."⁹³ What the graffiti at Westgate have in common, apart from a shared

⁹³ Baird and Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

suggestion of community, are representations of trade, religion, literacy, and social conscience. Their inoffensive, sometimes reflective nature may support the theory that debtors were of a class akin to educated, principled, religious or political prisoners rather than petty criminals and felons. Among their number were literate merchants and tradesmen, cultured members of society, their Christian faith important at a time of uncertainty and fear. Their sense of community and shared experience stretches across the decades.

The value of graffiti as a source to be integrated with traditional research methods is clear. Further recourse to the City Court records could enable further links to be made with names inscribed on the walls, and there remain many other documents yet to be studied. Additionally, there remains scope for further fieldwork in the form of specialist photography, drawing, determining the detailed stratigraphy of the marks, and recourse to graffiti and language specialists. More could potentially be revealed by the study of comparative sites such as Bargate in Southampton, where initial surveys have been recently undertaken.⁹⁴ That Hampshire has recently joined the rapidly developing medieval graffiti survey network and is undertaking research at such locations is an encouraging step towards greater understanding.

Despite the recent rise in the study of graffiti, there is still a clear preservation issue. Graffiti are only rarely afforded the same status as museum “objects,” yet are equally integral to the preservation of local tradition.⁹⁵ Without the graffiti, it seems highly unlikely that the Westgate’s time as a debtor’s prison would have been remembered. As the interest in graffiti research grows, it is hoped that more sites will make efforts not only to document, but to protect examples. 🐼

List of Abbreviations

HRO (Hampshire Records Office)
HCT (Hampshire Cultural Trust)
WCM (Winchester City Museums)

⁹⁴ Members of the Hampshire Regional Medieval Graffiti Survey, November 2016.

⁹⁵ A. Fox, “Remembering the Past in Early Modern England: Oral and Written Tradition,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, vol. 9 (1999), p. 235.

WINCM (Prefix to accession numbers, Winchester City Museums Service – now part of Hampshire Cultural Trust)

RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging)

PWCM (precedes accession number for photographs of Winchester City Museum collection, now curated by Hampshire Cultural Trust)

Note on editorial method concerning the transcription of original documents:

Unless otherwise stated, transcriptions are the author's own. Where abbreviations occur in reference documents, closed square brackets are used to indicate the missing element, including any superscript letters. Where the original authors have not clearly indicated an abbreviation but letters are likely to be missing, they are not added. Where “y” has been used in place of “th,” it has been replaced by [th]. Spellings have been transcribed verbatim.