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Scratches and Storytelling: Graffiti and interpretation at National Trust sites in Kent and East Sussex, England

By Nathalie Cohen, National Trust Archaeologist (South East) Canterbury Cathedral Archaeologist; Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, London

Introduction

Since 2012, recording and assessment of graffiti and inscriptions has become one of the principal archaeological research strands at National Trust properties across South East England; and the wider potential for engagement and sharing of discoveries has been encouraged by an enthusiastic response from visitors, volunteers and staff alike. This paper seeks to outline some of those discoveries and discuss the different ways in which the stories behind the marks have been presented to the public. The survey work has been undertaken by Matthew Champion Associates, the Winchelsea Archaeological Society, University of Southampton, and Museum of London Archaeology, at sites including the 14th-century cellar of Blackfriars Barn in Winchelsea, the palatial house at Knole, in Sevenoaks, the quintessential medieval castle at Bodiam, the roof of the Victorian mansion at Scotney, and the World War II deep shelter tunnels in Dover. Most recently, survey work has been in progress at Sissinghurst.

The work in context

In each case, the opportunity to record the graffiti and inscriptions observed during site visits by National Trust archaeologists was prompted by conservation works, and often as part of projects to open new areas to the public.
Blackfriars Barn Winchelsea, East Sussex

The port\(^1\) at “New” Winchelsea thrived in the first half of the 14\(^{th}\) century, however, a series of French raids in the second half of the century resulted in severe damage to the infrastructure and the curtailing of trade opportunities. This decline was further exacerbated by the silting up of the nearby harbor in the late-medieval and Tudor periods which finally brought maritime trade to an end. The remains of Blackfriars Barn are now located on the very edge of the current settlement, but it would have originally been in the center of the 14\(^{th}\)-century town. Located beneath the ruined building is one of the finest and largest of the thirty-three accessible medieval undercrofts in the town. This has three intact chambers (Bays 1-3). The use to which the cellar was put after the demolition of the building above is unclear, however, by the late 18\(^{th}\) or early 19\(^{th}\) century it was being used as an unofficial town dump. In 1976-1977 archaeologists removed the accumulated rubble and debris, and collected pottery and glass artifacts. In 2005, volunteers from the Winchelsea Archaeological Society cleared the undercroft of further loose debris and began re-boxing the ceramic assemblage. Graffiti had been noted in the westernmost chamber during remedial work by contractors in preparation for the opening of the site to the public and preliminary investigations were undertaken by Caroline Thackray (NT Territory Archaeologist) in 2010.

In May 2012, a photographic and drawn survey was undertaken by Matthew Champion and members of the Winchelsea Archaeological Society (\textit{fig. 1}); the survey recorded the extensive remains of at least thirteen examples of ship graffiti – twelve on the northern wall and one on the east wall of Bay 3. The original wall surface appears to have been comprised of a single layer of lime plaster, approximately 8-15 mm thick, applied over the natural stone fabric.


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The ship graffiti are unusual in a number of respects: they have been inscribed into freshly applied wet plaster, they are comparatively large (with the biggest in excess of 1000 mm in height) and they are located within an ostensibly secular structure. The ships were executed in a relatively crude manner, which may well be the result of the medium into which they were inscribed, with further detail being lost due to the damage to the surface. Still, all the images recorded clearly depict single-masted vessels with raised bow and stern sections, and some have “crows nests,” suggesting they represent larger sea-going vessels of an early date. Indeed, several of the smaller incomplete images bear striking similarities to contemporary depictions of the late-medieval trading “Cog,” as depicted on the early-14th century seal of Winchelsea. If such an interpretation is accepted, then the most likely date for the Blackfriars graffiti would lie in the period 1350-1450. It has been suggested that the
depiction of a fleet of ships on the cellar wall might commemorate an English victory at sea; on 29th August 1350, the Battle of Les Espagnols sur Mer ("the Spaniards on the Sea"), or the Battle of Winchelsea, was fought and won by Edward III and the Black Prince.2

Knole, Sevenoaks, Kent

Knole is one of the country’s most precious and exceptional historic houses, containing world-class collections of royal furniture, silver, paintings, and tapestries. It was acquired in 1456 by Thomas Bourchier, Archbishop of Canterbury, gifted to Henry VIII in 1538, and remodeled in the 17th century by the Sackville family. The house, set in a medieval deer park, has inspired writers, artists and visitors for centuries. Knole was the birthplace and childhood home of Vita Sackville-West, as well as the setting for Virginia Woolf's novel Orlando. Knole became a National Trust property in 1946 and is still home to the Sackville family.

Survey of graffiti and other marks forms an integral and ongoing part of the wider conservation project underway at the property. Running alongside the building survey and recording work undertaken by Museum of London Archaeology from April 2012, Matthew Champion has been recording the graffiti visible in the showrooms and other spaces due to open to the public as part of the Heritage Lottery Funded project. During the winter of 2012-2013, over 250 individual graffito, mostly dating to the 19th and 20th centuries, were recorded in the Upper Kings Room, the Second Painted Stairs Lobby, the South Barracks and the Retainers Gallery. The graffiti includes individual names, dates, information about activities such as snow clearance and installation of services, architectural sketches, portraits (fig. 2) and drawings of birds, flowers, and trees.

This work has provided a greater understanding of those individuals who lived and worked at Knole, and complements both the oral history project currently underway at the property, and the discoveries of artifacts retrieved from under the floorboards. Further graffiti recording took place within the rooms of the Outer Wicket Tower during April 2014, the North Wing, and East Attics in 2015 and 2016, and survey within the main Showrooms has been underway since early 2016. In addition to the later graffiti left by occupants, workers and visitors to Knole, the archaeological work has revealed an astonishing range of ritual protection marks across the building, in the form of medieval and post-medieval taper burns, incised compass-drawn and VV marks on leadwork, paneling, doors, fireplaces, furniture, and on roof and other structural timbers. During work in the winter of 2013 – 2014, the Museum of London Archaeology recorded a series of witchmarks incised on timber beams.
and floor joists in a room renovated in anticipation of a royal visit in the immediate aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot.\(^3\)

**Bodiam Castle, East Sussex**

Constructed during the closing years of the 14\(^{th}\) century for Sir Edward Dallingridge, the fairy-tale castle at Bodiam has been the subject of academic scrutiny over many years and has recently been analyzed in detail by Paul Drury Partnership for a Conservation Management Plan and by Jonathan Foyle for the production of a new guidebook for the property. Further academic research of the castle itself and the wider landscape has recently been undertaken by Professor Matthew Johnson and a team from Southampton University (UK) and Northwestern University (USA).\(^4\)

At Bodiam, an initial graffiti survey undertaken in 2010 by the Southampton University team was considerably enhanced by further work by Matthew Champion in February 2016. The original survey noted “visitor” graffiti dating from the late 17\(^{th}\) century onwards in abundance and masons’ marks relating to the castle’s construction during the late 14\(^{th}\) century, but the subsequent more detailed survey additionally recorded marks associated with occupation and use of the castle during the medieval period, in the form of text inscriptions, including personal names (fig. 3) and numerous compass-drawn designs which functioned as ritual protection marks.


Fan Bay Tunnels, Dover, Kent

In Dover, the excavation of the World War II deep shelter tunnels and earlier 20th-century sound mirrors at Fan Bay from 2013 onwards included a survey of 20th-century graffiti, again by Matthew Champion. In general terms, the graffiti falls into two very distinct categories: that from the period of military occupation and that from the decades immediately prior to acquisition by the National Trust in early 2013 (fig. 4).

The earlier inscriptions tend to be the more discrete, being executed on a small scale in either pencil or chalk, or carved into the chalk walls. A number contain enough detail to identify the person who created them and record their role in the construction of the tunnels or their presence while stationed at the site. Analysis of their distribution has revealed higher concentrations of graffiti within the long tunnels used as accommodation areas, both high up
on the walls (created by people lying in bunk beds), and around the areas where water tanks were formerly sited. Further concentrations of graffiti were recorded in the area of tunnels extending towards the sound mirrors and latrines. It is also in this area that the only possible
dated inscription was located that might be associated with First World War activity at the site; sadly the inscription is so badly worn that certainty is impossible. Perhaps most intriguingly the highest concentrations of wartime inscriptions were recorded in the areas immediately behind those areas where the tunnels had been backfilled, close to the exits from the sound mirrors and out onto the cliffs. The second general category of inscriptions dates from very recent decades and appears to have been recorded by either local people or “urban explorers” who visited the site during its decades of abandonment. These inscriptions are most often of a larger scale than those created during the wartime occupation, created in

Figure 4  Back-filled tunnel with wartime graffiti, Fan Bay Tunnels, Dover, Kent. Photo: Matthew Champion.
either chalk or paint, and record the names and dates of the individuals and their visits to the site. While these inscriptions form part of the “complete story” of the site, unfortunately, in some cases these obscure those dating from the wartime use of the tunnels.  

Figure 5  Taper burns, Sissinghurst Castle, Sissinghurst, Kent. Photo: author.

**Sissinghurst Castle, Sissinghurst and Scotney Mansion, Lamberhurst, Kent**

Roof works at Scotney led to the discovery of graffiti on the leadwork of the Salvin-designed mansion, while recent renovations at Sissinghurst have meant the opportunity for detailed examination of the Western Range and Tower. Both surveys have meant a greater understanding of less studied aspects of the history of the properties. At Scotney, previously unknown World War II activity in the form of regimental inscriptions was recorded, while at Sissinghurst, further examples of Napoleonic era graffiti were discovered, and previously unrecorded taper burn marks were observed in both the north and south wings of the western range in unusually dense concentrations. (fig. 5)

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Interpretation, engagement and widening participation

At all properties, the results of the graffiti surveys have disseminated to the public using a wide variety of different engagement methods; online, in person and through traditional media. This can be as simple as a tweet or Facebook post via property or researcher channels, highlighting a current discovery. This form of digital outreach has been especially useful where the graffiti is not visible to the visiting public, such as that recorded at Scotney, or when work is actually underway – providing anyone with social media access with an immediate update on the recording. Online content has also been added to property web pages and a number of articles written for National Trust publications such as the *Arts, Buildings and Collections Bulletin* and *Views* magazine, as well as short papers in archaeological periodicals such as *Current Archaeology* and *Archaeology* magazine (USA). The discoveries have also generated considerable press interest, and have been featured in regional, national and international press pieces – the discovery of the 17th-century witchmarks at Knole, in particular, received widespread attention during late 2014.

Information about the discoveries made during the graffiti surveys has also been disseminated widely in person though lectures to archaeological and historical groups and societies across London, Kent, and East Sussex, and also through lectures and guided tours at the properties, especially at Winchelsea, Bodiam and Knole. At Bodiam, the graffiti survey has deepened our understanding of the building both during its occupation and as a “visitor destination,” and regular tours are now led by the team of costumed interpreters at the site (fig. 6). A “graffiti trail” has also been produced to allow visitors to explore the inscriptions. However, it is at Knole where the discoveries of graffiti and inscriptions can be seen to have had the greatest impact to the “visitor experience,” supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Additional funding as part of the major conservation project has allowed for the development
of outreach activities based around graffiti including coloring in sheets for younger visitors
and the construction of a temporary “graffiti wall” (fig. 7).

The witchmarks in the Upper Kings Room will form part of the visitor route when the
Attics open to the public in 2018 and the floorboards have been refitted with hinges, allowing
them to be lifted and the marks shown to the public. The discoveries made by Matthew
Champion and MOLA have allowed the National Trust to tell completely new stories about
the construction and use of the building across the centuries. Graffiti recording also forms
part of the training for the Knole Archaeology team, alongside landscape and building survey
and other archaeological methods and techniques.
Figure 7  Knole graffiti wall during a Festival of Archaeology event, Sevenoaks, Kent.  
Photo: author.

One of the most exciting outcomes of the surveys undertaken at the National Trust has been the development of a new community archaeology group, the Kent Medieval Graffiti Survey. This volunteer-led group evolved, as a result of the enthusiasm of the Knole Archaeology team, and was inspired by the survey work at the property and by the work of the long-established regional groups in East Anglia.

Conclusion

Surveys of graffiti and inscriptions at a wide range of National Trust properties of different chronological periods have inspired a new understanding of aspects of their historic fabric, from their construction, use and abandonment, and have informed conservation practice at the sites. The work has also deepened our knowledge of those who lived, worked and visited these sites, and adds a new aspect to our engagement with these buildings and structures for staff, volunteers and visitors. It is hoped that we can continue to extend the
surveys to other properties across the South East over the next few years, in order to build a complete record of graffiti at those sites in the care of the National Trust, to add to the record of those properties in our care and to share the discoveries as widely as possible.