



Plate 3  
Oxburgh. Detail of screen.

## **SIGNATORY MARKS OF CRAFTSMEN AND OTHERS IN SEVENTEENTH- AND EARLY EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NORFOLK**

*by* Robin Lucas


### **SUMMARY**

*Marks used to witness documents included a number of standard devices for the practitioners of particular trades.*

Persons familiar with social documents of the 17th and 18th centuries will be aware of the use of distinctive signatory marks by persons who could not write on a range of papers which required proof of their knowledge and acceptance of the contents. The documents might serve legal purposes such as wills, contracts and court depositions. Amongst the documents held in the Norfolk Record Office where such marks have been observed are tradesmen's bills and parish glebe terriers. With such marks bills were receipted and terriers witnessed. The incidence of such marks could not be regarded as common. Undoubtedly the reason why Norfolk


terriers can show so many distinctive signatory marks is that, compared with holdings for other counties, the terriers for Norfolk parishes are especially numerous and the runs unusually complete<sup>1</sup>. Signatory marks fall into two categories. Firstly, there are those which are personal devices; and secondly, there are those which are expressive of occupations.


### Personalised marks

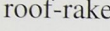
These are the most numerous of distinctive marks. They are abstract in form and very commonly are no more than elaborations of the first letter of the signatory's Christian name. In 1613 four out of six witnesses to the terrier for Edingthorpe signed with such marks<sup>2</sup>; similarly, in 1627, five out of six witnesses at Denver<sup>3</sup>; in 1687, four out of nine witnesses at Ingworth<sup>4</sup>; and in an undated 17th-century terrier for Haddiscoe, three out of four witnesses<sup>5</sup>. Occasionally the personalised mark was not a development of alphabetical characters but was pictorial, even symbolic. John Smalwood and Richard Deps, churchwardens and witnesses respectively at Freethorpe in 1613 and Denver in 1627, employed a five-pointed star, thus , similar to but not identical with the Star of David which is six-pointed<sup>6,7</sup>.




### Occupational marks

Occupational symbols were used by tradesmen and were based on a tool or element of the product which is or was descriptive of their work. Amongst Norfolk examples the occupational marks of building craftsmen are prominent.

Brickmakers used the device  which was taken, of course, from a single brick mould. This was the mark used by Arthur Russell, brickmaker, in a bill of 1663 addressed to the justices at Quarter Sessions for the building of a new bridge at Trowse<sup>8</sup>. Matthew Sparham used the same mark in his bill to the Recorder of Thetford for 10,200 bricks sold and delivered by him in 1680 for use in the construction of the new Thetford Guildhall<sup>9</sup>. A photograph of the receipt to that bill is reproduced here as Plate I. The latest use of the mark so far detected is on two bills from a randomly preserved collection of bills submitted to Lord Townshend of Raynham in 1725. The bills were receipted by the brickmaker John Fisher<sup>10</sup>. When the device occurs in a glebe terrier, as it does in the terrier for Swanton Novers dated 1663, it is reasonable to suppose that the user, George Lambert, churchwarden, was also a brickmaker<sup>11</sup>. It was in the 18th and 19th centuries that Swanton Novers was celebrated for the quality of its brick-earth<sup>12</sup> and it would not be surprising to learn that even in the 17th century there was resident in the parish a brickmaker who was proud of his trade. One of the six references in the 1838 tithe map for Swanton Novers to sometime-existing brickyards<sup>13</sup> might well refer to a site worked by George Lambert in the 1660s, and possibly to a site which contributed bricks to the raising of nearby Melton Constable Hall which was rebuilt after 1664. The use of the brick-mould device by Austin Browning, brickmaker of Barcombe in Sussex, on a deposition made in 1598 shows that the device was used elsewhere in the country and, possibly, from an earlier date<sup>14</sup>. Roger Sarney, brickmaker of Rotherfield Greys in Oxfordshire, used the device on his will drawn up in 1619<sup>15</sup>.

Returning to Norfolk but still remaining with the brick trade, it is worth observing the mark of a bricklayer. In an undated 17th-century terrier John Berry of Ingoldisthorpe, a mason or bricklayer, signed with a trowel, thus: <sup>16</sup>. It was occasionally the practice in Norfolk to call a mason or bricklayer a trowel or trowelman, as witnessed by the 1679-80 building accounts for Thetford Guildhall<sup>17</sup>, and the use by such a person of a trowel as his mark may be seen as especially appropriate<sup>18</sup>.

A third group of Norfolk building craftsmen to use occupational marks were thatchers. The thatcher's mark was a roof-rake, looking not unlike a tooth-brush, thus: . In another randomly preserved bundle of receipted bills in the Raynham archives, this time for the year 1686, there are fourteen bills marked by the device which was used by three different thatchers: William Barrett (11 Bills), Richard Coulesea (2 bills) and George Gill (1 bill)<sup>19</sup>. Reproduced here as Plate II is Coulesea's bill for thatching in South Raynham for which he received payment on 4 December 1686. In a different collection of documents Samuel Spencer, a thatcher, signed the bill submitted to Cyril Wyche of Hockwold, in 1696, with the rake device<sup>20</sup>. Thatchers' marks witness at least three Norfolk glebe terriers: that of Erpingham for 1613 when it was used by John ffern<sup>21</sup>; that of Frettenham for an unspecified year (probably 1613, again) in the 17th century when it was used by John Balding<sup>22</sup>; and that of Reedham in 1677 when it was used by John Willis<sup>23</sup>.

The number of occupational marks used by tradesman who were not building craftsmen may not have been many. Few have been identified in Norfolk documents. No Norfolk example has so far been reported to parallel the wheel device employed by Henry Hathway, wheelwright of Bristol, to sign a will dated 22 November 1667<sup>24</sup>. One very obvious device employed by a tradesman not involved in building construction was a horseshoe, thus: , used by Edward Fattle(?), witness and farrier of Croxton in 1636<sup>25</sup>. Another obvious device was a pair of scissors, thus: . This was the mark used by John Brown to witness the Twyford terrier for 1613<sup>26</sup> and by Francis Winter to witness the Denver glebe terrier for 1677<sup>27</sup>: both witnesses, it may be supposed, were tailors. The interpretation of another mark is more problematical. The device  appears once in the terriers, used as his mark in 1635 by Henry Gould of Whissonsett<sup>28</sup>. This was not, in all likelihood, a double brickmould, but rather a frame, perhaps a hurdle to contain livestock or else a tenter used in textile manufacture. Of course it could, as with the personalised marks, have been no more than a device which the user found agreeable and have had no meaning.

### The explanation for signatory marks

The use of marks might itself be the subject of study. Their use might, in a rough-and-ready way, reflect the lack of literacy in 17th-century England, even amongst persons of substance. Marks were rarely accompanied by signatures. Many of the users were tradesmen, some were yeomen, and some, indeed, churchwardens. Masons and merchants, as is known, employed a range of abstract devices in the medieval and early post-medieval period. Their use of marks could not be said to imply illiteracy but was, rather, quasi-heraldic<sup>29</sup>. But the later use of distinctive marks coincided with a period producing more documents than previously and documents which required witness. It cannot be supposed that the latter-day users of distinctive marks would not have signed their names had they been able to do so. That bricklayers and thatchers were, as shown by their marks, illiterate might be expected, for they fell within a group of the least educated building craftsmen of the 17th century. From a sample of 24 bricklayers who made depositions at the Norwich Consistory Court between 1580 and 1700, 88 per cent were unable to sign them with their names. For thatchers the evidence was even more telling. From a sample of 33 thatchers, 97 per cent were unable to sign<sup>30</sup>. The marks of brickmakers have been given some attention in this article. It is worth pointing out that whilst no depositions were made at the Norwich Consistory Court by brickmakers who were called as such, brickmakers did, at that time and later, not uncommonly pass under the description of 'bricklayers' for the reason that the making and laying of bricks was often performed by the same persons.

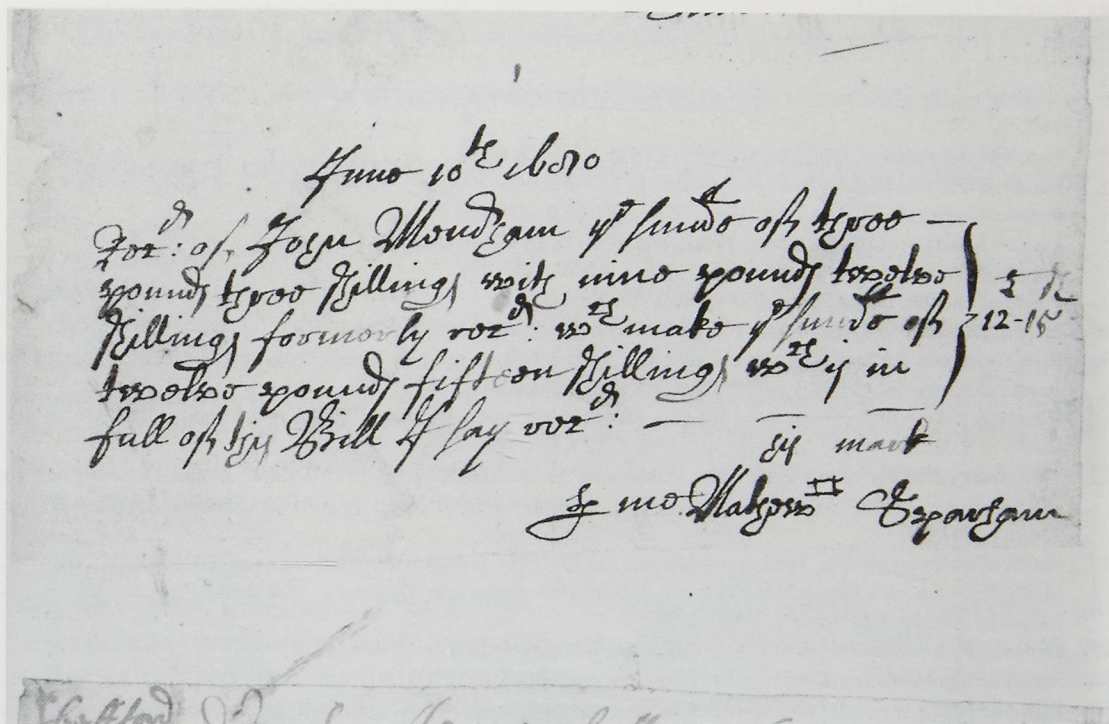


Plate 1. Brickmaker's mark. The device of Matthew Sparham, used to receipt payment on a bill for bricks required for the construction of the Guildhall at Thetford, 1680.

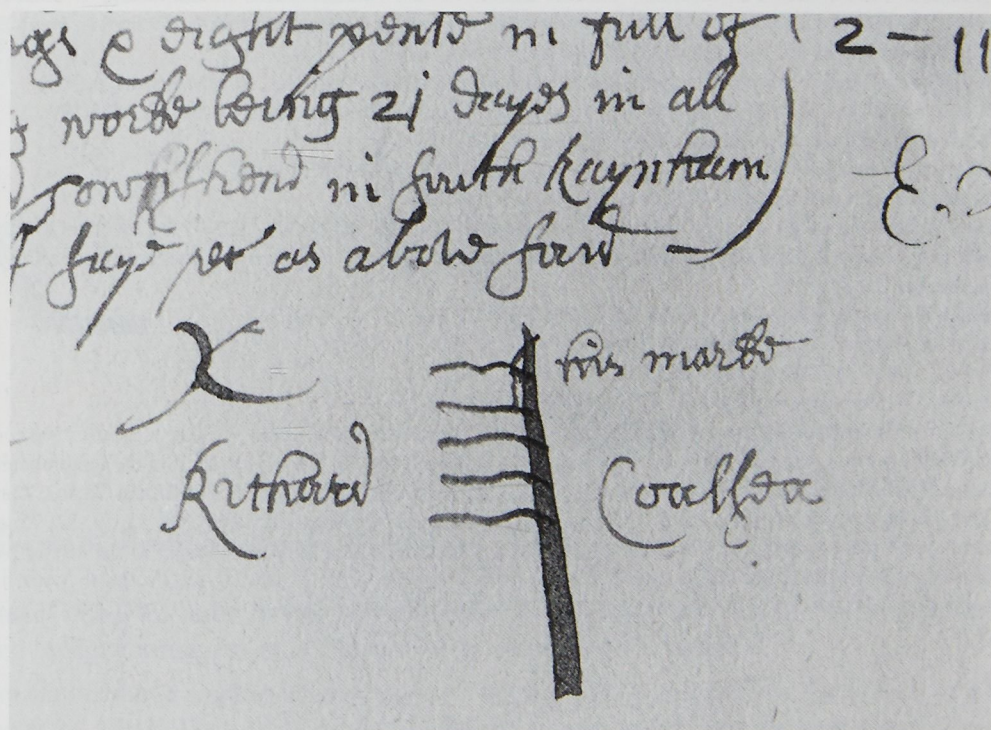


Plate 2. Thatcher's mark. The device of Richard Coulfsea, used to receipt payment of a bill for work performed at South Raynham for the Viscount Townshend, 1686.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Plates 1 and 2 have been reproduced by kind permission of the Town Clerk of Thetford and Lord Townshend.

1. Norfolk parish glebe terriers (Norfolk Record Office, Norwich diocesan archives, DN/TER 1-171 and ANW 15/1-4).
2. Parish of Edingthorpe, Glebe terrier, 1613 (NRO, DN/TER 61/2).
3. Parish of Denver, Glebe terrier, 1627 (NRO, DN/TER 53/4).
4. Parish of Ingworth, Glebe terrier, 1687 (NRO, DN/TER 91/5).
5. Parish of Haddiscoe, Glebe terrier, 17th century (NRO, DN/TER 75/5).
6. Parish of Freethorpe, Glebe terrier, 1613 (NRO, ANW 15/2/129).
7. Parish of Denver, Glebe terrier, 1627 (NRO, DN/TER 53/4).
8. Norwich Quarter Sessions orders, 1663-4 (NRO, Norwich city records, case 22a (4) ).
9. Bills for labour and materials involved in the construction of the new guildhall during the recordership of Sir Joseph Williamson, 1679-80, p. 385 (Thetford municipal archives, T/C1/11).
10. Vouchers and small accounts, late 16th-18th centuries (Raynham Hall archives, RCHM Report p. 167).
11. Parish of Swanton Novers, Glebe terrier, 1663 (NRO, DN/TER 143).
12. *The universal British directory of trade, commerce, and manufacture* (5 vols., London: British Directory Office, 1792-4), vol. 3, p. 280. William White, *History, gazetteer, and directory of Norfolk* (Sheffield: William White, 1845), p. 747.
13. Parish of Swanton Novers, Tithe apportionment, 1838 (NRO, Norwich diocesan archives, TA 109).
14. Molly Beswick, *Brickmaking in Sussex: a history and a gazetteer* (Midhurst: Middleton Press for the Sussex Industrial Archaeology Society, 1993), p. 74.
15. *Oxfordshire brickmakers* (Woodstock: Oxfordshire Museums Service, 1980), p. 13.
16. Parish of Ingoldisthorpe, Glebe terrier, 17th century (NRO, DN/TER 91/4).
17. Bills for labour and materials involved in the construction of the new guildhall during the recordership of Sir Joseph Williamson, 1679-80, p. 375 (Thetford municipal archives, T/C1/11).
18. The practice of referring to a bricklayer or mason as a trowel or trowelman continued until well into the 18th century, as shown by bills submitted for brickwork. Richard Shallders to John Berney (for repair of the Westwick brick-kiln), 8 September 1703 (NRO, PET 834/14); Robert Bishop to the churchwardens of Litcham, 11 November 1758 (NRO, PD 459/109); Thomas Butcher to the churchwardens of Shipdham, 1 October 1777 (NRO, PD 337/93); Hugh Butcher to the churchwardens of East Dereham, 1783 (NRO, PD 86/94); Hugh Butcher to the headboroughs of East Dereham, 1784 (NRO, PD 86/141).
19. Vouchers and small accounts, late 16th-18th centuries (Raynham Hall archives, RCHM Report, p. 167).
20. Bills submitted to Cyril Wyche and paid 24 June 1696 (NRO, Wyche papers, MS 22054, MC 195/19).
21. Parish of Erpingham, Glebe terrier, 1613 (NRO, ANW 15/2/171).
22. Parish of Frettenham, Glebe terrier, 17th century (NRO, ANW 15/2/125).
23. Parish of Reedham, Glebe terrier, 17th century (NRO, DN/TER 121/2).
24. 'Henry Hathway makes his mark', *Local history news*, No. 24, 1992 (February, p.25). I am indebted to Miss Jean Kennedy, County Archivist of Norfolk, for bringing this notice to my attention and encouraging me to write on this subject.
25. Parish of Croxton, Glebe terrier, 1636 (NRO, DN/TER 53/2/1).
26. Parish of Twyford, Glebe terrier, 1613 (NRO, ANW 15/2/95).
27. Parish of Denver, Glebe terrier, 1677 (NRO, DN/TER 53/4).
28. Parish of Whissonsett, Glebe terrier, 1635 (NRO, DN/TER 162).
29. Benjamin Mackerell, *The history and antiquities of the flourishing corporation of King's Lynn in the county of Norfolk* (London, Lynn and Norwich, 1738), pp. 17, 19, 39, 41, 43, 50, 102, 112, 122, and the unnumbered plate variously interleaved by the binder, according to the copy, between pp. 254 and 257. William Taylor, *The antiquities of King's Lynn, Norfolk* (Lynn: J. Thew; London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1844), pp. 52, 53, 54, 75, and the unnumbered plate facing p. 49. William Creasy Ewing, *Notices of the merchants' marks in the city of Norwich* (Norwich: Charles Muskett, 1850).
30. David Cressy, 'Levels of illiteracy in England, 1530-1730', *Historical Journal*, vol. 20, 1977 (No. 1, pp. 1-23), p.5.