A Hidden Medieval Door and Graffiti at the Church of SS Mary and Andrew, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire

Taleyna Fletcher
Neil J Loader
Iain Robertson

The unexpected survival of a medieval door became apparent during building works at the Church of SS Mary and Andrew, Whittlesford. Removal of the door blocking also exposed a group of graffiti which led to a survey of other markings within the building, including the 'Whittlesford Archer'.

Introduction

In August 2006, Cambridgeshire County Council's Archaeological Field Unit, CAM ARC (now Oxford Archaeology East) conducted archaeological investigations in the churchyard immediately to the north of the Church of SS Mary and Andrew, Whittlesford (Fig 1). The church lies on the north-eastern edge of the village at about 25m OD on a low spur overlooking the River Cam, 10km to the south of Cambridge.

The work was carried out on behalf of the Parochial Church Council in advance of an extension to the church to provide a meeting room, kitchen and toilet with associated services. It involved the excavation of foundation trenches, connecting floor beams and a septic tank, which resulted in the exposure of numerous burials. A second phase of work entailed the recording of part of the north wall (Fig 2a), the removal of two 19th-century buttresses and the opening of a bricked-up doorway, which was to become an entrance to the new extension. During recording work within the church following the opening up of the doorway, a number of graffiti were noted and recorded (Fletcher 2007).

The Church and Cemetery

At Domesday, Whittlesford was *Witelsforda*, in reference to the village's origin as the location of a ford across the River Cam. While the earliest surviving fabric of the church (HER 04271) is of early 12th-century date – in the nave, tower and chancel – two fragments of Late Anglo-Saxon grave covers and a cross are present within the building (Fox 1921, plate 5, type 6, no 25). A remarkable carved stone sheela-na-gig depicting a female figure built into the outside face of the church tower perhaps represents an element of a series of carvings representing the seven deadly sins (Taylor 1997, 109).

During the recent work, one burial was recorded beneath the foundations of the northern wall of the church. Radiocarbon analysis dates this burial to AD 770-980 (1155 ± 35 BP; SUERC-12892, GU-14928; 2 sigma calibrated result at 95.4% probability; calibrated using OxCal v3.10). Although it was not possible to ascertain the sex of the individual, it was aged between 20-30 years old at time of death. This pre-church burial suggests activity in the vicinity during the Middle to Late Saxon period. Little evidence of this period has been found previously in this part of Whittlesford and this grave perhaps indicates the presence of an earlier church on the site.

Fig 1
Site location (Drawing by Severine Bezie)

The Hidden North Door

The Doorway

The north doorway has a two-centred arch with a moulded profile continuous with the jambs, probably late 13th or 14th century. Only the western (right hand) stop of the hoodmould survives. It is a carved head but exposure to the elements means that the features are now too worn to distinguish. The moulding profile part way down the jambs on the exterior has also deteriorated due to weathering. Viewed from inside, it is clear that the rerearch truncates a deeply splayed Romanesque window (Fig 2b).

The bricks used to block up the doorway were laid in a Flemish bond with a white sandy lime mortar. Most of the bricks, which date to 1800-1850, were hard-fired, orange-red, un-frogged and measured on average 220 x 105 x 65mm. Once the buttress and

a

b

c

Fig 2a
The north wall of the church, showing the doorway before removal of the brickwork;
Fig 2b
The blocked doorway from the interior of the church, showing its relationship to the Norman window
Fig 2c
The wooden door, exposed on removal of the brickwork (photography by Taleyna Fletcher)

below ground store had been removed, the bricks were removed, revealing a wooden door, hanging *in situ* (Fig 2c).

The Door

The Whittlesford door was constructed of nine overlapping oak boards cut with a fine, near symmetrical tongue and groove jointing, each board being approximately 15mm thick (Fig 3). A number of boards that comprise the door are cut to planks radially with a vertical grain, such that when viewed from the top or bottom, the rings stand perpendicular to the broad face of the plank. These 'standing rings' are only attainable from a small part of the tree and are believed to offer strength, increase durability and reduce the effects of warping. The planks are jointed and held in place using narrow oak strips secured horizontally to the back of the door (visible only from the inside) using square-headed iron nails. The door is best preserved towards its top.

The pintles upon which the door hangs are bonded into the archway, secured with molten lead and appear to be original. They are a good fit with the door hinges, which also appear to be contemporary. The strap hinges (of which only the top example remains) were constructed of iron and are bound to the length of the door with iron studs and decorated with a cross pattern. An outer wooden rim, located on the inner surface of the door provides additional support. It is not apparent whether this was added after initial construction of the door, although the fact that it is well-shaped to the planked section suggests a common construction age: there are many comparative examples which confirm this as a standard approach. The door is in relatively good condition, although approximately 0.30m of the timbers are missing from

Fig 3
Detail of the door (drawing by Andrew Corrigan and Severine Bezie)

its base, possibly as a result of damage caused by the insertion of water pipes for heating. There is no outer handle on the door, which locked only from the inside with a sliding bolt held in place with iron brackets. The door could be secured using an integral hasp and staple with a padlock (not present).

Dendrochronology and Radiocarbon dating

Radiocarbon samples were prepared using the standard acid-alkali-acid pre-treatment and calibrated using IntCal04 (Reimer *et al*, 2004).The two ring groups sub-sampled from the base of the door both yielded dates in the 12th-13th century (Loader and Robertson 2007):

Sample 1 - AD 1170-1280 (Beta–251530; 790±40 BP; 2 sigma calibrated result 95% probability)
Sample 2 - AD 1200-1280 (Beta–251531; 780±40 BP; 2 sigma calibrated result 95% probability)

Dendrochronological dating (English Heritage 2004) of these two samples, which both contained in excess of 80 rings, each failed to yield a conclusive match using the range of reference chronologies available in Swansea. This would suggest either that the sample series contained significant management/disturbance signals that did not enable a robust match, or that the temporal and/or geographical origin of the timbers did not overlap with the master series.

The series were therefore run against the wider database of tree-ring chronologies archived by Cathy Tyers at Sheffield University. Whilst no robust dendrochronological match was found with Sample 1, possibly reflecting difficulties in resolving the rings sampled towards the outer edge of the series or across rays, a dendrochronological match was obtained with Sample 2 providing a 14th-century end date. Since neither sapwood nor the outermost ring were present it was not possible to determine a felling date or to provide a sapwood estimate for this single dated series which covered the period AD 1219-1313. This result was the only date that yielded significant, consistent matches in the entire historic (ie post-Roman onwards) period, and suggests that results from both dendrochronological and radiocarbon dating, carried out independently, produce the same answer. Strongest matches were obtained against chronologies constructed from known imported timbers of Baltic origin (C Tyers, pers comm).

Evidence from both radiometric and dendrochronological dating confirm a 13th- to 14th-century date for the timbers sampled and that the door was constructed post AD 1313 from timbers probably imported from the Baltic region of mainland Europe. This 14th-century date ties in well with the style of the doorway, providing further evidence that this is the original door for the archway which has survived *in situ* for the best part of 600 years, making it a highly significant artefact.

The Graffiti

A number of methods were used to find the best means of capturing the images around the church including tracing rubbing and photographic survey. Although for the long-term archive, tracing may be a better option, photography is undoubtedly the best format for presenting the results here. A halogen lamp was used, directing the light from various angles (although from below proved to be the most effective), which cast a sufficient shadow to pick up the detail of the graffiti. The results often give the impression that the carvings are in relief; although this is not the case, it does show the detail at its best. Small scales were fixed to the wall using 'blue tack' and the location of each mark was recorded on a plan of the church (Fig 4).

As in so many churches and public stone buildings of any significant age, Whittlesford Church has numerous names and initials inscribed around it both inside and out. There are also a vast number of concentric circles and patterns as well as remnants of graffiti which have often been almost completely removed or are now illegible. This study therefore concentrates on presenting and describing those examples which are more clear and decipherable and those newly discovered which may add to previous discussion and interpretation. For this purpose, 14 images are presented below although the authors encourage the search and discovery of more.

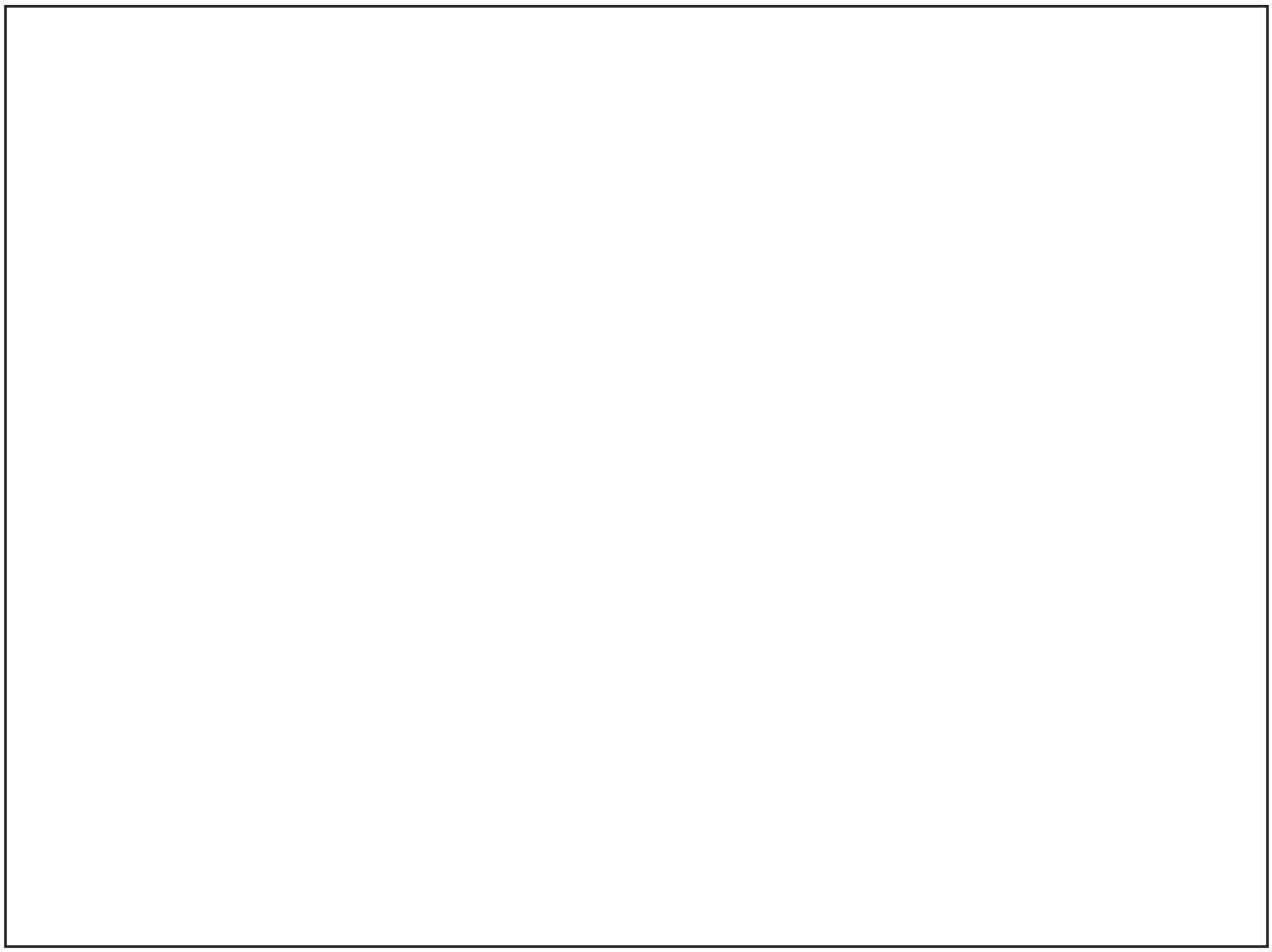

Fig 4
Plan of SS Mary and Andrew, showing the location of graffiti (drawing by Severine Bezie)

Illustrated Graffiti

Located on the right-hand side of the newly opened doorway on the north wall of the church (on the right as you enter) is a collection of graffiti (G1-G3 on the west jamb and G4 on the east jamb) previously covered up by the blocked doorway and a built-in 19th-century display cabinet (Fig 2b). Figure 4 shows the location of this and other graffiti recorded throughout the church, as described below.

G1 (Fig 5)

This image appears to represent a figure, facing towards the interior of the church. The body is simple, in a triangular form and may be wearing a dress or gown with arms in front, perhaps to suggest praying. The head is tilted forward and a horizontal line may represent hair or a head scarf/covering. The body/gown of the figure has been decorated with a number of dots. An image behind the figure is harder to make out, possibly wings that might suggest an angelic theme.

G2 (Fig 5)

This figure, which lies to the right of G1, is very much like G1 in the simplistic triangular form of the body with the same dotted detail within it. The face is much more detailed and, like G1, is facing into the church. The nose is clear on the face, as are the eyes and a down-turned mouth. The letters I and S are located immediately to the left of the figure and appear to be contemporary. This may be a form of the initials 'IHS' which stands for the Latin phrase *Iesus Hominum Salvator*. This is known as 'the sacred monogram' and is frequently found in medieval and Renaissance art.

Fig 5
Graffiti 1-7 (photography by Taleyna Fletcher, drawings by Gillian Greer)

G3 (Fig 5)

Another *IS* inscription appears immediately above G2 within the same part of the doorway beneath which *'Semberg'* (?) is written.

G4 (Fig 5)

Within the northern doorway on the opposite side to G1-3 is more graffiti. On this side there has at some point been an attempt to 'clean' the walls, perhaps when the traditional Victorian limewash was removed or as an attempt to remove the graffiti which has left this side much more difficult to decipher. There appear to be two graffiti here. The most recent is what appears to be an upright figure holding a shield. Although only one leg and a shield (or possibly a harp?) are clear, the proportions suggest that they are part of the same image.

In what seems to be an earlier phase of graffiti, beneath G4, is a motif of two closed-circuit oval loops. This symbol is based on an ancient design which has been found in Bronze Age rock art through to medieval graffiti and is commonly found in churches, particularly in the south-east of England (Saward, not dated). Similar designs have been recorded in Chaldon, Surrey, Rye in East Sussex and Steyning in West Sussex.

G5 (Fig 5)

Located on a south-facing pillar between the nave and chancel, to the left of the tower is a figure, well known in the church as the 'Whittlesford Archer'. This figure measures approximately 0.28m high and depicts a long, lean figure holding a bow with an arm withdrawn which may be pulling back an arrow. GG Coulton, who recorded the figure in 1915, suggested a medieval date on the basis of the costume. Interestingly, located to the immediate left of the graffiti is a stained glass window with an image of Roger Ascham, also holding a bow. Ascham (1515-1568), was tutor to Elizabeth I, and a keen bowman. He received the lease of the rectory in Whittlesford from 1563 which passed to his wife in 1568 upon his death (Wright *et al* 1978, 263-276). Could this graffiti be in respect of Roger Ascham?

G6 (Fig 5)

This is located on a central pillar between the Lady Chapel and the Chancel, on the north-facing side. There are a number of phases of graffiti on top of each other in this location, the most recent are the initials TD and the year 1631 within an inscribed box. There is also a five-pointed star below. The most interesting graffiti, however, is beneath the initials, and appears to be a window design. It has a four-centred arch with panel tracery (six narrow lights above three broad lights) of 15th- century design. Interestingly, this window does not correspond with any of the fenestration elsewhere in the present church. Perhaps it is an image of window now destroyed, or more likely, a stonemason etching out a design that was never used.

A previous study of church graffiti in South Cambridgeshire churches (Coulton 1915) identified this window inscription as well as four others in nearby Gamlingay, Barrington and Offley. Coulton also believed them to be the work of stonemasons.

G7 (Fig 5)

This is located on the east-facing part of a pillar between the altar and the vestry. Initially this appeared to be a figure with stick-like arms and legs and a crude face. Another interpretation of this graffito is that it represents a mason's pair of compasses or pointers (V Roulinson, pers comm), and in antiquity has been turned into a figure with the addition of detail to create a face.

G8 (Fig 6)

This is located on a central pillar between the Lady Chapel and the chancel, on the north-facing side, which must have been inscribed before the present screen between the chancel and the nave was added (NB the photograph only shows part of the inscription which runs around the pillar; the first word is partially obscured by a wooden screen). This inscription reads *frater senis apostate,* which translated means 'brother [monk or friar] Senis is an apostate' (P Ford, pers comm; Coulton's interpretation of the second word is *Fenis*). Above this inscription is the date 1388.

Fig 6
Graffiti 8-14 (photography by Taleyna Fletcher, drawings by Gillian Greer)

G9 (Fig 6)

This is located on the pillar between the altar and vestry and is one of many names and initials inscribed around the church. This location for example bears the names of John Turner and Richard Slater. As there are no dates associated it is impossible to say how old this graffiti is, although the style of the writing suggests that neither is modern and they may have originated in the 18th century. Between the two names is another inscription, this one in Latin, some of which had been lost due to repair to the pillar, which reads *SIC VIVE VT M[OR]IEN[S] VIVAS*. Translated by Professor Ford, this means *Live in such a way that on dying you may live*; the calligraphy implies that this dedication was made to or by Richard Slater whose name appears directly below.

G10 and G11 (Fig 6)

These are located on a pillar between the nave and south aisle and are examples of simple shields or coats of arms. G11 is interesting in that traces of a dark red paint are visible within it. This red paint may be remnants of colour which once decorated the walls and pillars. Like most medieval churches, Whittlesford Church would have been decorated in bright colours such as greens and reds, at least until the 19th century when churches were cleaned and white-washed.

G12 and G13 (Fig 6)

A significant number of geometric patterns made up of concentric circles were recorded around the building. These patterns are formed by taking two fixed points, and with an instrument such as pointers, scratching circles. The patterns recorded varied from simple circles within circles, overlapping circles and swirls to six-petalled flower shapes. G12 and G13 are examples of some of the patterns found. These shapes or patterns may represent the work of masons practising their layout for window tracery designs; they are unlikely to be masons' marks, which are usually simpler and rarely use curves.

G14 Fig 6

Located next to G12 is a simple 'T' inscription. The most common places to find markings are on piers, capitals, window jambs, mullions and door mouldings (Brooks 1961).

Discussion

Like many historic parish churches, Whittlesford's Church has a wealth of features and details waiting to be explored in more detail. Although the church is an excellent example of the use of locally derived materials (Carter 2004, 7), the discovery of the blocked north door is not only significant for Whittlesford, but also for the region and ecclesiastical archaeology, particularly since the use of Baltic oak was not commonplace in parish churches at this time. It was, however, used in the ceiling at Peterborough Cathedral (felling date after *c*1238; Tyers and Tyers 2007) and also in the choir stalls at Ely Cathedral (felling date *c*1340; Atkinson 1948). The door appears to have been contemporary with its archway and was made to fit it. Relatively few original church doors from this period survive and the discovery of the door at Whittlesford has sparked debate about how such an artefact should be valued and preserved. Issues include how it should be displayed; both for the future study of ecclesiastical architecture in general and as part of the fabric of this historic building.

Many early churches had both north and south doors, and it is not uncommon to find a blocked north door in churches today. Although the bricks used to infill the Whittlesford doorway suggest it was blocked in the 19th century, it is possible that the door went out of use long before this time. Such doors were an important part of procession in medieval services: north doors were often blocked up after the Reformation, when they were no longer needed.

The graffiti at Whittlesford and in other churches in and around south Cambridgeshire owes its survival to the stone used in their construction. Some of the graffiti around the north door has remained hidden for at least 100 years. Despite the efforts of church restorers, Whittlesford Church has retained much of its earlier graffiti, either due to the depth of the incision or simply because it was hidden away in areas such as the

blocked north door. Either way, we are left with a legacy of fascinating historical 'vandalism' that affords us an, albeit fragmentary, insight into the lives of the parishioners of Whittlesford and their changing relationship with the church since medieval times. As for the door itself, it is fortunate that – either due to its size or difficulty in removal – the Victorians chose to leave it in place, allowing its rediscovery, recording and restoration.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are extended to Patricia Carter and Professor Roy Switsur for their invaluable support and Cathy Tyers (English Heritage Dendrochronology Laboratory, Sheffield University) for her assistance with the dendrochronological dating. Professor Philip Ford of Cambridge University, Dr George Nash and Vicki Roulinson are also thanked for their help with deciphering some of the graffiti and thanks also to Dr Tim Reynolds for helping with locating the Ely Cathedral reference. This article was prepared for publication by Elizabeth Popescu.

Taleyna Fletcher is a senior Project Officer with Oxford Archaeology East, where she is currently involved in developing a building recording team. Iain Loader is a Senior Lecturer in the School of the Environment and Society at Swansea University, with research interests including the determination of the physical and chemical properties of absolutely-dated tree rings to enable an assessment of the nature and magnitude of the widely-reported anthropogenic changes in climate. Neil Loader is an Advanced Research Fellow at the University of Swansea. His current research subjects include quaternary environmental change and stable isotope analysis of natural archives (tree-rings, Sphagnum, pollen)

The Society for Church Archaeology thanks Oxford Archaeology for contributing towards the costs of publishing this paper

Bibliography

Atkinson, TD, 1948 (for 1943-1947), 'Queen Phillipa's Pews in Ely Cathedral' *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society,* Vol XLI, 60-66

Brooks, FW, 1961, 'Masons' Marks', *The East Yorkshire Local History Series No. 1,* York: The East Yorkshire Local History Society

Carter, T, 2004, The Anatomy of a Victorian Village: Whittlesford 1800-1900. Whittlesford Victorian Group, 158

Coulton, GG, 1915, 'Medieval Graffiti, Especially in the Eastern Counties', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, Vol. LXVII, 53-62

English Heritage, 2004, *Dendrochronology: Guidelines on producing and interpreting dendrochronological dates*, http://www.helm.org.uk/server/show/nav.00h01c001/chooseLetter/D (last viewed 03.02.10)

Fletcher, T, 2007, *Archaeological Investigations and Historic Building Recording Survey at The Church of St Mary and St Andrew, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire:* CAM ARC Report Number 933

Fox, C, 1921, 'Anglo-Saxon Monumental Sculpture in the Cambridgeshire District', *Proceedings of the Cambridgeshire Antiquarian Society* 23, 15-45

Loader, NJ and Robertson, I, 2007, Report on the analysis of timbers from 'the hidden north door' Church of St. Mary & St. Andrew, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire, in Fletcher, T, *Archaeological Investigations and Historic Building Recording Survey at The Church of St Mary and St Andrew, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire:* CAM ARC Report Number 933

Reimer, PJ, Baillie, MGL, Bard, E, Bayliss, A, Beck, JW, Bertrand, C, Blackwell, PG, Buck, CE, Burr, G, Cutler, KB, Damon, PE, Edwards, RL, Fairbanks, RG, Friedrich, M, Guilderson, TP, Hughen, KA, Kromer, B, McCormac, FG, Manning, S, Bronk Ramsey, C, Reimer, RW, Remmele, S, Southon, JR, Stuiver, M, Talamo, S, Taylor, FW, van der Plicht, J and Weyhenmeyer, CE, 2004, 'IntCal 2004 Terrestrial radiocarbon Age calibration, 0-26 Cal Kyr BP'. *Radiocarbon* 46(3), 1029-1058

Saward, J, not dated, *The Chaldon Labyrinths,* www.labyrinthos.net/chadon.htm (last viewed 14.04.09)

Taylor, A, 1997, *Archaeology of Cambridgeshire. Vol. 1: south west Cambridgeshire,* Cambridgeshire County Council

Tyers, C, & Tyers, I, 2007, *Peterborough Cathedral, Tree-Ring Analysis of the Nave Ceiling;* English Heritage Research Department Report 4/2007

Wright, APM (editor), Rosen, AB, Keeling, SM, Meekings, C A F, 1978 *A History of the County of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely,* Vol 6