# Cult or contract? Cross mark graffiti in Worcestershire churches

by Murray Andrews

Thousands of small crosses can be found scratched into the walls of medieval churches across Europe and the Latin East, with examples noted as far apart as Jerusalem, Norway, and, closer to home, a string of English parish chuches from Gloucestershire in the north-west to Kent in the south-east.[1] Though Worcestershire has long been a blank spot on the distribution map, recent fieldwork has identified dozens of similar examples from county churches, casting fresh light on the interface of faith and 'folk art' in this corner of the West Midlands.[2]

**Classifying cross mark graffiti**

The cross marks found in Worcestershire churches take a surprising variety of forms (Fig 1). The simplest and most widespread type is the plain cross, formed of a vertical bar and horizontal crossbar and known from churches at Badsey, Broadway, Evesham St Andrew, Great Comberton, Holt, Powick, and Ribbesford. Most are of the Greek cross (*crux quadrata)* type with four equal-length arms, while the more familiar Latin cross (*crux immissa*) types with long descending arms are surprisingly uncommon. One variant of the plain cross, the saltire cross (*crux decussata*), is formed of two bars arranged diagonally, and is known from the churches at Evesham St Lawrence and Powick. These three designs are well-attested within the medieval heraldic tradition, and can be found on armorials, monuments, and portable objects across Europe.[3]

More elaborate designs can be found at other county churches. Plain crosses with beaded terminals (*cross pommée*), a design often associated with the Crusades, can be found at Badsey, Claines, Great Comberton, Little Comberton, and Shrawley. One notable variant from Little Comberton has a single pellet in each angle, and resembles an unusual type from Cleeve Prior, which consists of a plain cross with crossbar terminals on the upper and lower limbs (*cross potent*) and a single pellet in each angle and above the upper limb.[4] Examples of crosses with tapered limbs (*cross pattée*) have been recorded at Badsey and Shrawley, the latter formed of solid triangles and the former of 'voided' lines. The most unusual example, however, comes from Wichenford, and consists of an ornate 'jewel cross' with separate ovoid limbs, a design known from the coinage of Harold I (1035-40) and Harthacnut (1040-2).[5]

**The placement of cross mark graffiti**

As seen in other regions, the cross marks found in Worcestershire churches occur in a range of different configurations. Most are scratched into surfaces in isolation, and individual crosses of this kind can be found scattered across church walls at Evesham St Andrew, Holt, Powick, and elsewhere. At other churches, however, crosses appear in small groups of two or more. In some cases the groups consist of a single type of mark repeated on several occasions: at

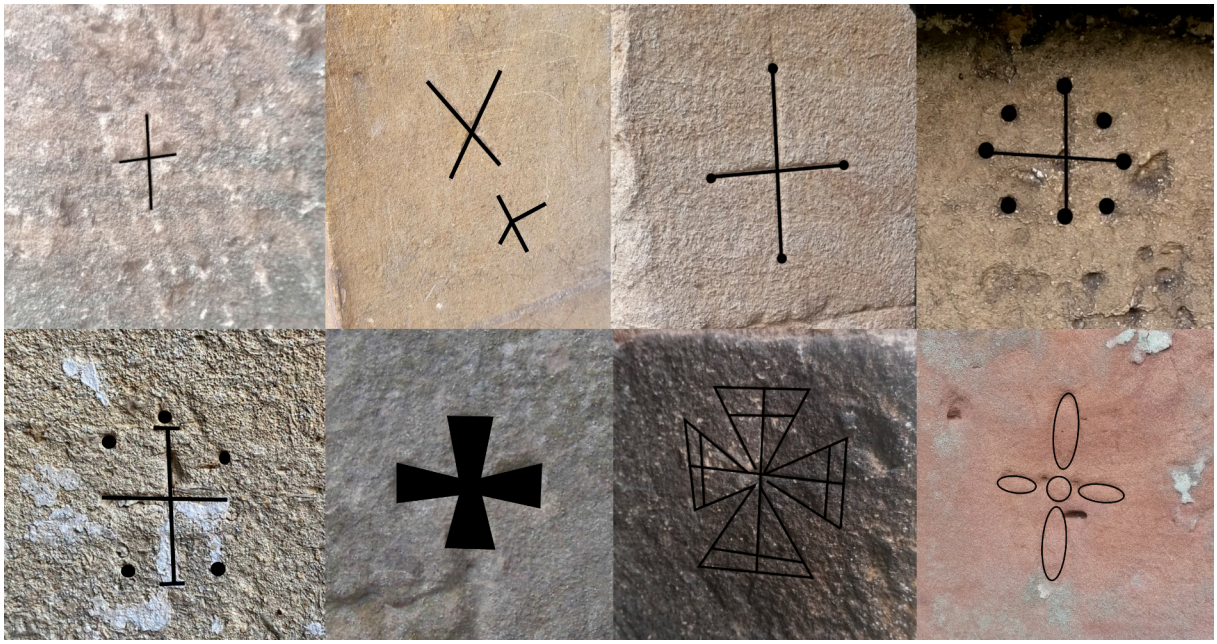

*Fig 1: Typology of cross mark graffiti recorded in Worcestershire churches (left to right, top to bottom): plain cross, saltire cross, cross pommée, cross pommée with pellets in angles, cross potent with pellets in angles, cross pattée, voided cross pattée, jewel cross (author's photo)*

*Fig 2: Combined cross pommée and cross pattée marks on the south-east door jamb at St Mary's, Shrawley (author's photo)*

Evesham St Lawrence, for example, there are at least three *crux decussata* marks scratched into the door jambs of the 15th century west tower. In other cases, however, two or three different types of cross mark are used together. These normally consist of groups of *crux quadrata* and *cross pommée* marks, as seen at Badsey and Great Comberton, but Shrawley furnishes an unusual trio of *cross pommée* and *cross pattée* marks around the south-east jamb of the Romanesque door (Fig 2). Whether these distinctions in the composition of cross mark groups reflect differences in their formation – for instance, whether they were scratched by one person or more, or were produced over a longer or shorter period – is unfortunately unclear. In any case, it is important to note that cross marks in Worcestershire churches are rarely, if ever, combined with other forms of graffiti, an observation that may have repercussions for their overall interpretation (see below).

Research into East Anglian church graffiti suggests that cross marks were more often scratched into the exteriors of churches than their interiors, and tend to cluster around 'threshold locations' like doorways and porches.[6] This pattern mostly holds true for Worcestershire, with notable doorway groups present at Evesham St Lawrence, Great Comberton, Ribbesford, and Shrawley. Interestingly, not all of these are located in the traditional entrance of the south porch: at Badsey, for instance, a pair of *crux quadrata* and *cross pommé* marks can be seen scratched into the east jamb of the north door. Beyond doorways and porches, several other locations can also be seen to carry cross marks. Powick, for example, has several on the exterior walls of the south aisle and transept, but none on the doorways. Little Comberton, meanwhile, has an interesting isolated example scratched at knee-height beneath the window of the 15th-century west tower (Fig 1, top right).

**Dating cross mark graffiti**

While dating historic graffiti is notoriously tricky, most cross marks found on Worcestershire churches can be given a *terminus post quem* (TPQ) by virtue of having been cut into datable building fabric. As such, the cross marks cut into Romanesque door jambs at Ribbesford and Shrawley can be dated no earlier than the 12th century, while those found on the Decorated south aisle of Powick church cannot predate the 14th century.[7] Most recorded examples, however, have been observed on Perpendicular masonry, and must therefore date to the 15th century or later.

While fabric evidence can only provide the earliest possible date at which a cross mark was cut, building stratigraphy sometimes offers *terminus ante quem* (TAQ) dates for specific examples found in the county. At Evesham St Lawrence, for example, a saltire cross mark has been cut by 20th- or 21st-century graffiti, so can hardly be modern. Similarly, examples at Cleeve Prior, Ribbesford, and Shrawley (Fig 2) show evidence of having been infilled or overlain with render or whitewash, most probably of post-medieval date. It seems likely, therefore, that most cross marks found on Worcestershire churches date to the Middle Ages, and probably to the two centuries between the Black Death and the Reformation (*c.*1350-1550). However, we cannot exclude the possibility that some were added in the Tudor period or thereafter.

**Cult or contract? The function of cross mark graffiti**

Why did medieval people take the time to scratch tiny crosses into the walls of Worcestershire's churches?

One possible explanation is that cross marks are simply a form of 'banker mark', a kind of personal trademark used by medieval stonemasons to denote authorship of – and right to payment for – specific elements of large building projects, whether secular or religious in nature.[8] First used in England during the mid-11th century, examples of banker marks can be found at several sites in Worcestershire, including Droitwich St Peter-de-Witton, Evesham St Andrew, and Worcester Cathedral. While the known corpus of medieval English banker marks is typologically diverse, Worcestershire examples are nearly always simple alphabetical, curvilinear, and hourglass shapes, which frequently sit side-by-side on adjacent blocks within the same physical structure. The best local examples of cross marks used in this manner occur at Great Malvern Priory, where *crux quadrata* marks sit alongside several other motifs on different blocks of the nave pillars, denoting the responsibility of several

*Fig 3: Combined crux quadrata, hourglass, arrow and curvilinear banker marks on the nave piers of Great Malvern Priory (author's photo)*

different masons for the Romanesque work (Fig 3). What is striking about the Great Malvern cross marks, however, is just how different they are from nearly all other Worcestershire examples, which rarely if ever appear beside other diagnostic banker marks, and often feature several crosses on the same block of stonework – an obvious functional mismatch (see Fig 2). Given these discrepancies, it seems likely that most of the county's cross marks require a different explanation.

One alternative interpretation of cross marks, popular among researchers elsewhere in Britain and Europe, situates the phenomenon within a wider tradition of medieval religious devotion, in which supplicants seeking divine assistance would mark a vow to God and the saints in material form: for instance, by folding a coin, or, in this case, scratching a cross into a church wall.[9] Unlike banker marks, the designs of devotional cross marks are therefore directly relevant to their function, evoking Christian symbols for fundamentally religious purposes, such as marking pilgrimages, pious commitments to donations or bequests, or some other intended good deed. Links between cross marks and medieval devotional ritual are suggested by written sources: the *Vita* of the 12th-century Prioress Christina of Markyate, for example, records how she commited herself to a nun's life by making *'a sign of the cross with one of her fingernails on the door'* of St Alban's Abbey.[10]

A third possibility, however, is offered by recent work in East Anglia. Since cross marks usually appear near the entrances of churches, Champion suggests that they reflect attempts to solemnise activities that took place around the church porch, whether sacraments like marriage or secular rituals like the swearing of affadavits and conclusion of verbal agreements.[11] In this light, making a cross mark was analogous to signing a document: a public means of guaranteeing an agreement, perhaps with the added bonus of securing church blessings upon it. According to this theory, the symbol of the cross has an essentially contractual significance, mirroring the pre-modern practice of signing written documents with a cross.

Which of these theories best fits the evidence from Worcestershire churches? Outside of Great Malvern Priory, there is little evidence from Worcestershire for the use of cross marks as banker marks, which have different placement conventions and encompass a far greater range of design motifs. Conversely, the crosses that can be found scratched into the walls of county churches are more typologically diverse than the simple plain crosses that were normally used to sign medieval documents.[12] While it is true that many Worcestershire examples have been found around church porches, this may reflect their role as liminal spaces rather than sites for sacramental or secular agreements. Indeed, it is notable that some cross marks occur in locations that are ill-suited to public advertisement: the elaborate cross mark from Little Comberton's 15th-century tower, for instance, could only have been made (and is still best seen) when kneeling, a kind of supplicatory gesture familiar from Catholic rites like the Adoration of the Cross. On balance, therefore, Worcestershire's cross marks are best understood as physical traces of medieval devotional activity, whether private or public, and reflect some of the diverse forms of Christian belief swept away by the Tudor Reformation.

**References**


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