St Mary's church, Ashley

Historical graffiti survey report

Surveyors: Karen Parker, Aldous Rees, Kirsty Rodwell, Karen Wardley

August 2023

Grid Ref: SU384309 Postcode: SO20 6RJ

Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project

http://www.hantsfieldclub.org.uk/medieval-grafiti/index.html

E-mail: medieval.graffiti@hantsfieldclub.org.uk

Introduction

Members of the Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project (HMGP) first visited St Mary's church to evaluate the historical graffiti there in 2016. A substantial amount was discovered, mainly in the porch and around the south doorway, and on the chancel arch. A return visit was made to carry out a full survey in 2020. The most intriguing find was a medieval Latin inscription scratched into the chancel arch, which became the subject of substantial further research and investigation. The story of this investigation, and what it revealed about this unique inscription, is included in this report as an Appendix.

The church: a brief description

This modest church stands within the outer bailey of a Norman ringwork, which it may pre-date (Bullen et al, 2010). The building is essentially Norman, with a narrow nave and chancel which was extended in the 13th century. The walls are mainly flint rubble, with chalk block dressings and quoins, rendered with lime mortar. A brick south porch is dated 1701, and there is a Victorian bell-gable. The Purbeck marble font is probably contemporary with the founding of the church, and there is a sturdy wooden alms box dating from the 17th century. A restored 13th century wall painting of a young woman is in the jamb of the chancel south window, and there are traces of earlier paint, mostly red, throughout the building.

The church was under the patronage of the Priory at Mottisfont from 1201 until the Reformation, when it passed to the Sandys family. In 1980, due a dwindling population and large repair programme it was transferred to the Redundant Churches Fund, now the Churches Conservation Trust, who maintain it with support from an active Friends group.

Graffiti survey methodology

Group members scan the building to locate the graffiti, using a raking light source in the interior, and ambient daylight on the exterior. The team then record each mark or sets of marks with a digital camera. Sometimes multiple images are taken using different angles of light source. The location and type of graffiti are recorded on record sheets. Images are later transferred to a computer where further enhanced identifications are made and this detail is collated with the original field data. As well as graffiti, construction and other "unofficial" marks are also recorded.

Graffiti summary and discussion

There are two areas where significant amounts of graffiti are found. These are around the entrance (the porch and south doorway) and on the chancel arch.

The south porch

1 The south porch

Over the entrance to the brick porch is a date stone of 1701 with the initials R + L, with CW beneath. The church guide (Vigar, 2005) suggests that these are a pair of churchwardens' initials from that time: RC + LW (Figs 1& 2). Inscriptions with pairs of churchwardens' initials (or their full names), recording works carried out during their tenure are common from the early 18th century. Examples include the 1703 plaque on the rebuilt brick tower at St Andrew's Tichborne, and the wooden table dated 1704 in the new St Peter's church in Stockbridge. In these cases, however, unlike at Ashley, the designation "churchwardens" is included so their status is confirmed.

2 Porch, 1701 Date stone with RC + LW initials

The initial W, containing traces of red paint can be clearly seen on the west side of the porch entrance, on the projecting impost stone at the base of the arch (Fig 3). A possible initial I occurs further along.

3 Porch entrance, Initial W

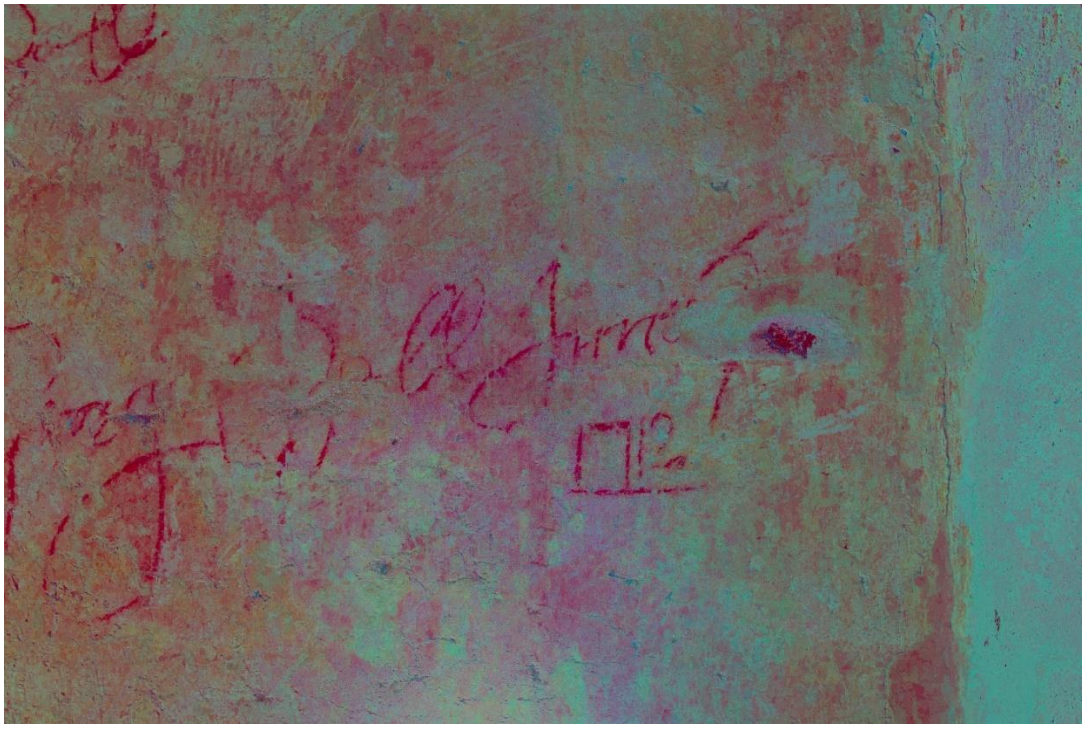
The initials CW, MH, and a single X are inscribed into the bricks on the exterior west wall of the porch.

4 Porch interior, west wall

Inside, on the plastered walls, are various scratched marks and shapes including crossed diagonal lines, and on both east and west walls (Fig 4) is some red-painted writing from the 18th century, seemingly made by the same person, George Poll (Fig 4). Poll is a variation of the name Paul or Pool. The dates 1707/8 and 1712 are associated with repetitions of this name. A process called DStretch was applied to some images. This technique enhances the pigment colours to show up detail. Figs 5, 6 & 7 demonstrate the use of this technique on sections of the west wall where the name George Poll, followed by the date June 1712, can be seen very clearly.

5 Porch interior, west wall, George Poll name shown in DStretch

6 Section of porch west wall with red painted graffiti



7 Section of porch west wall, DSretch applied to accentuate red pigment. George Poll June 1712

Parish business was often carried out in church porches in the medieval and post-Reformation periods, so perhaps this graffiti records transactions made by George Poll, who left his name and date here.

There are wooden benches on each side of the porch, and carpenters' assembly marks can be seen on both. Fig 8 shows the marks incised on the east bench.

8 Porch interior, east bench, carpenters' assembly marks

The interior

The south doorway

The largest concentrations of graffiti within churches are usually found around the entrances, and Ashley church is no exception. There are many crosses, the main Christian symbol, incised on each side of the doorway and on the jambs (Figs 9 & 10).

9 South doorway, west jamb

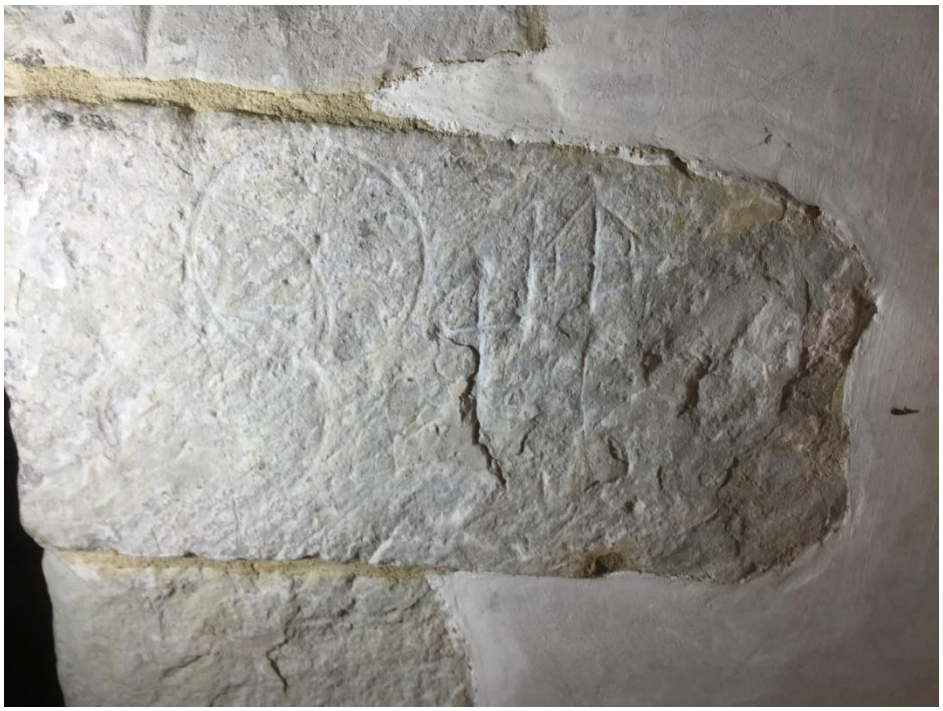
10 South doorway, east jamb

It used to be thought that these were marks left by pilgrims, on their way to the shrines at Winchester and Canterbury. While this may have an element of truth – it is a tradition continued by modern day pilgrims – it is now thought that these marks may also have been left by local parishioners, as symbols of prayer and devotion. These crosses take different forms, some are crudely made, others are more finely incised. Some have dots at the terminals, which may have been made first as guides for cutting the shape. These are known as budded crosses (Fig 11). One cross on the impost on the east side is enclosed within a circle and can be seen in Fig 10.

11 South doorway, west jamb, budded crosses

On the east jamb of the doorway one block of stone has 2 crosses whose terminals are joined to form a triangular shape at the top. Next to these are some compass-drawn intersecting circles (Fig 12). These circular motifs are common finds in churches, and also in post-Reformation domestic contexts where they are thought to be apotropaic

in function, made to protect the building and its occupants from evil. They are usually found around building openings such as doorways, windows and chimneys. Similar circular symbols also appear on the chancel arch, see later for discussion.



12 ***South doorway, east jamb. Intersecting circles and crosses***

The chancel

13 Chancel, north window, east side, deep grooves

In the chancel, on the east side of the north window, is a criss-cross pattern cut deeply into the edge of the soft chalk block (Fig 13). The significance of these marks is unknown.

The chancel arch

The chancel arch is Norman in date, with later openings on each side, made to improve parishioners' views into the chancel (Fig 14).

14 ***The chancel arch, looking east***

Graffiti was found on both sides of the arch, on the jambs and the surfaces facing into the nave and chancel.

15 Nave, east wall behind pulpit. Budded cross

There are simple crosses on the east wall of the nave on each side of the arch, including a deeply carved budded cross behind the pulpit, now filled with limewash (Fig 15).

There are also several compass-drawn circles, including the ubiquitous six-petalled rosette shape, also known as the hexfoil or daisy-wheel, which is a very common find in churches, both in this country and more widely in Europe.

On the north jamb of the arch there is one with a concentric border, which is quite worn, with another circle above it (Fig 16). Just below these are traces of more intersecting examples.

16 Chancel arch, north jamb, six-petalled rosette

On the south jamb of the arch there are more single examples, and a very finely made and elaborate pattern of intersecting six-petalled rosettes (Fig 17).

17 Chancel arch, south jamb. Interlaced six-petalled rosettes

Although used as ritual protection marks in domestic contexts from the 17th century onwards, these motifs were originally a Christian symbol, found widely in 12th and 13th century contexts, for example on fonts, and only later were supplanted by the cross as the most common Christian icon. The large number of these motifs in this area is unusual and suggests they were made with the acceptance of the church authorities and may have had some particular significance.

Carved next to one of the six-petalled rosettes on the north jamb of the arch is an unusual, curved shape, rather like a number 9, or a capital D, but whose meaning is unknown (Fig 18).

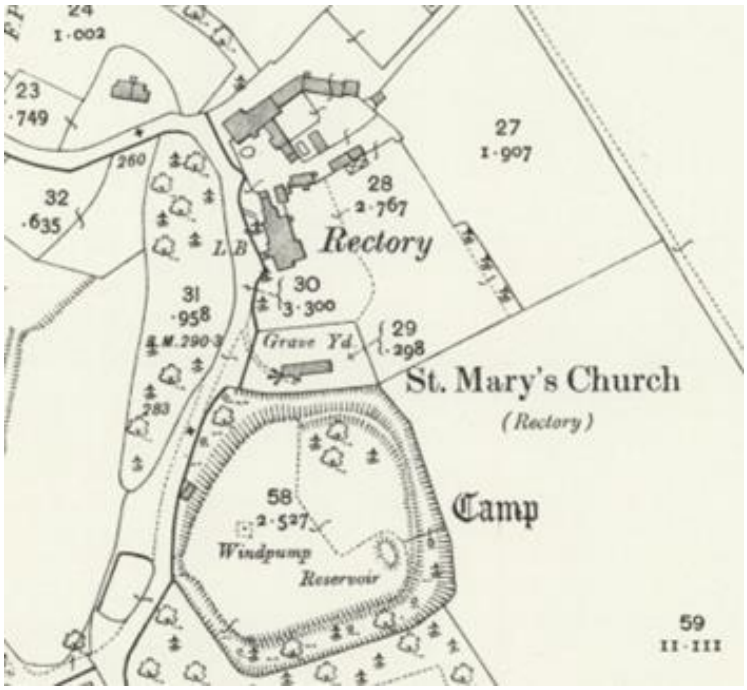
18 Chancel arch, north jamb, curved shape

On the north side of the arch, on the chamfered edge, are 3 triangular shapes which probably represent heraldic shields (Fig 19). Each has different patterning inside and they might represent the arms of local families. However, without any colour, it is hard to identify them. Below these shapes is a five-pointed star or pentagram. This is another Christian symbol which evolved into a protective symbol, and later in the post-Reformation period became associated with witchcraft and magic. In Christian iconography it symbolised the five wounds of Christ, and in the legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it appears on the shield of Sir Gawain, representing his purity and serving as a defence against demons (Champion, 2015).

19 Chancel arch, north side. Heraldic shields and pentagram

The exterior

There is an Ordnance Survey benchmark carved into the south-west corner of the nave. It has been covered with many layers of limewash but is still visible. It can be seen marked in the same location on the 25 inch Ordnance Survey map of 1892 – 1914 (Fig 20).



20 From 25 inch Ordnance Survey map, 1892 - 1914

The CCT guide notes that there is a scratch dial on the south wall of the nave. In 1943 AR Green recorded the presence of 2 such dials, “SW of nave”. Our surveyors could not find any of these dials. They have probably been masked by later layers of limewash.

Survey archive

153 photographs were taken during the survey. The RTI survey resulted in over 250 images. All images and record sheets are held by the Hampshire Field Club Medieval Graffiti Project archive and are available on request. A copy of this report has been lodged with the Hampshire Historic Environment Record, the Churches Conservation Trust, the Friends of St Mary's church and posted on the HFC website.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Churches Conservation Trust for their support with this project, especially Tina Osgood, CCT Local Community Officer, for bringing us together with the Friends of St Mary's church, who, with the HFC Historic Buildings Section, provided generous financial support to allow us to commission the RTI survey.

Disclaimer

APPENDIX

The graffito inscription

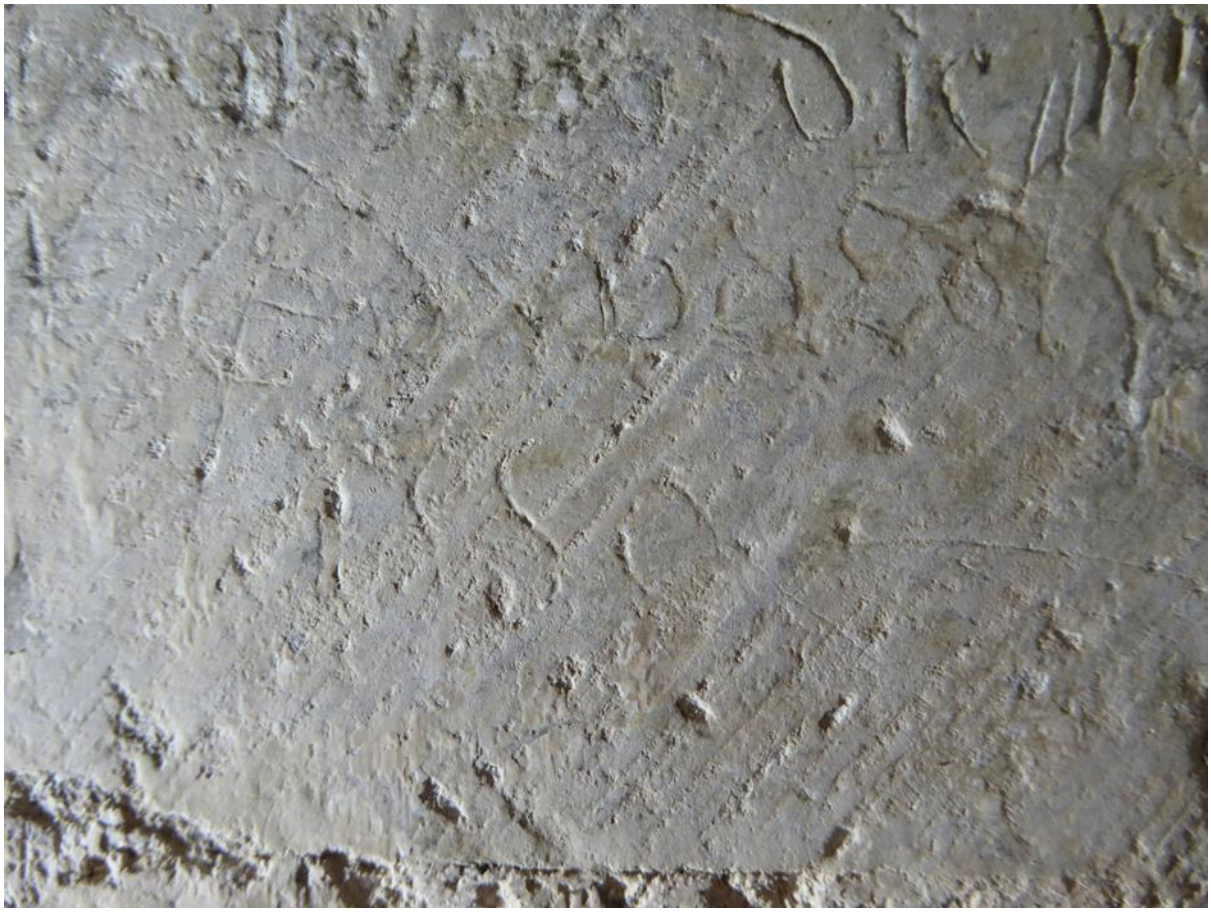
The most notable piece of graffiti at St Mary's is a graffito Latin inscription in 16th century script, scratched at eye level into a layer of whitewash on the north jamb of the Norman chancel arch (Fig 21). Although mentioned in the CCT guidebook, there is no transcription or indication of what it might say. A reference is given to a similar inscription at Clopton on the Hill, Gloucestershire, but on investigation it was found that the only similarity was the location of the inscription on the chancel arch, as the Clopton inscription is earlier and in a different script, recorded by the British Listed Buildings website as a Latin inscription of c.1289 in Lombardic script. Translated, it instructs the reader to say certain prayers to receive an indulgence of a reduction of a thousand days in purgatory. One of the HMGP group, Karen Parker, who has transcribed many 16th century wills and inventories, recognised the Ashley script as being of this date, and took on the challenge to try to uncover the meaning of the inscription here.

21 Chancel arch, north jamb. The graffito inscription

Medieval Latin graffito inscriptions are notoriously hard to decipher, due to worn surfaces, the use of dog Latin, many abbreviations and a cavalier approach to spelling. They are also rare finds in Hampshire. There is one example: several lines

of Latin text incised over the 14th century wall painting on the north chancel wall at St Hubert's church, Idsworth. Transcribed by Francis Wormald and published in Antiquaries Journal, 1945, it is shown to be liturgical, a set of benedictions used at a particular feast day in 1481, possibly made as a mnemonic for the priest. Outside the county, there are famous inscriptions at St Mary's, Ashwell, Herts, recording the catastrophic effect of the plague hitting the village in 1349. Another inscription, probably recording a later plague, but which had equally devastating consequences, is on the north chancel wall at St Edmund's church, Acle, Norfolk (Champion, 2015).

Following an initial survey, then delayed by our own pandemic, the graffiti team returned to investigate the Ashley inscription more fully in 2020, and took many photographs, lit from different directions, so that as much of the faint lettering as possible could be seen. Some parts were readable and quite heavily incised, others less so, and some words were missing. Eventually, Karen could see that the inscription is dated ultimo die Junii – the last day of June. And below this R(egis) Edwardi Sexti Qu(arto) 1550 – in the 4th year of the reign of Edward VI, 1550 (Fig 22).



22 Close-up of date 1550 in Arabic numerals with Edward's name above

Karen recognised this as a very significant date in relation to the Protestant reforms of the time, when the authorities were trying to stamp out the old Catholic practices which many churches were reluctant to abandon. An inscription at this time suggested it could be a record of a momentous event within this community.

At that stage we realised that ordinary photography could not reveal any more of the inscription, so, following a Church Planning meeting led by CCT's Local Community Officer and generous contributions made by the Friends of St Mary's Church and the Hampshire Field Club Historic Buildings Section, the HMGP commissioned a specialist firm, Archaeovision, to photograph the inscription using a technique called Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI). The technique involves the taking a series of individual images from a fixed position, each lit (with a flash or continuous light source) from varying directions following the shape of a physical or imaginary umbrella/dome (Fig 23). This survey took place in August 2022.

23 James Miles from Archaeovision carrying out the RTI survey

The resultant sharply-defined images allowed us to view the inscription as a whole and to confirm that it was restricted to one particular block of stone. We sent images to Tom Olding, a medieval Latin specialist and palaeographer, who confirmed the date we had seen and made out the abbreviated words for *huius ecclesiae* - of this church. This, and the use of Latin, added weight to the idea that it had been inscribed by a person who was literate and that it related specifically to this church building.

From Eamonn Duffy's book "The Stripping of the Altars", (the definitive account of English religion from 1400 to 1580) we learn that an Act was passed in 1550 for "the defacing of images and the bringing in of books of old service in the church", and which also, significantly, ordered the destruction, by the end of June, of "all images of stone, timber, alabaster or earth, graven, carved or painted which heretofore have been broken out of any church or chapel or yet stand in any church or chapel." The

responsibility for this destruction lay with local officials such as church wardens. There were hefty fines for failure to comply – 20 shillings for a first offence, £4 for a second, and imprisonment for a third.

There was in consequence a widespread covering of wall paintings with whitewash in English parish churches at this time. Sadly the 16th century Ashley churchwardens accounts do not survive, unlike those for Bramley church, near Basingstoke, where the parish records of 1550 include expenses incurred for the replacement of the altar with a simple table, and the “whytynge” of the church.

24 Chancel, south window. Restored 13th century wall painting

How tempting it is then, to suppose that this inscription is a unique and exciting find of national significance, inscribed perhaps by Edward Williamson, the rector of Ashley in 1550 or his church warden. Alternatively, it could have been made by a local commissioner acting on behalf of the government, to record that the requirements of the 1550 Act had been carried out, just in the nick of time, and that the church was free from all graven images and idolatrous wall paintings. That these paintings existed is evidenced by the restored 13th century wall painting of a female figure next to the south window in the chancel (Fig 24) and the fainter vestiges of paint that survive elsewhere in the church.

The importance of this action, which must have been of huge significance to the parish, was such that someone was moved to commemorate the event within the fabric of the church itself.

Karen Wardley

Co-ordinator, Hampshire Medieval Graffiti Project

August 2023

References

Bullen, Michael, Crook, John, Hubbock, Rodney, Pevsner, Nikolaus, (2010), Hampshire: Winchester and the North, The Buildings of England

Champion, Matthew (2015), Medieval Graffiti. The lost voices of England's churches

Duffy, Eamonn, (2005) The Stripping of the Altars, 2nd edition

Green, A R, (1943), Incised dials, scratch dials or mass-clocks on the walls of Hampshire churches, Proceedings Hampshire Field Club, Vol XV, Part 3

Vigar, John E., (2005) St Mary's church, Ashley, Hampshire, The Churches Conservation Trust

Williams, Gwyn Tudur, The early church wardens accounts of Hampshire

Wormald, Francis, (1945), A Wall-painting at Idsworth, Hants, and a Liturgical Graffito, Antiquaries Journal Vol 25