

After all, it is only graffiti...

Over the last eight years St Mary's church at Troston in Suffolk has received a fair amount of media attention. Whilst the church was already known for its really quite spectacular medieval wall paintings, much of the new media attention has been focussed upon the regionally significant collection of early graffiti to be found on the walls. Today was the turn of TV presenter and generally sound chap Clive Anderson, who was there to film a short section for a new documentary. You may not all rate him as a presenter, and you may not all find him funny (although his take-down of Piers Morgan to his face still ranks as one of the high points of modern television in my eyes), but you have to admire his courage - for today he was subjected to four hours in a cold church, listening to me rant on about how wonderful the medieval graffiti there really is. And the graffiti at Troston REALLY is that good. It has everything. Animals, people, faces, ships, dates and demons. Lots of demons. It really is rather special.



However, it soon became apparent on today's trip that not everything was well with the Troston graffiti, and that something very serious is taking place at the junction between the tower and nave. These two images show the same wall only two years apart - the image on the left having been taken this morning. The fifteenth and sixteenth century graffiti inscriptions (as well as later examples) are

literally crumbling to dust, and flaking from the walls. Having survived for over five centuries something has changed, apparent by the very obvious damp levels rising through the stonework. The result is a mass of mineral salts leaching from the stonework, and some very serious delamination of the stone of the tower arch on the north side.



Luckily the graffiti at Troston is well recorded, and has been previously published - but that is all that will soon be left of this regionally significant collection of medieval and Tudor graffiti. The published record.

The problem of course is that this isn't just happening in Troston church, but at dozens of other sites across the region. These inscriptions are being lost at a fantastic rate. Some are being lost to development, where the church undertakes 'improvements' without first surveying for significant graffiti. Others are lost due to changes in the church environment, often the result of poor maintenance and lack of funds to repairs the churches. Sometimes the losses are just through carelessness.



However, it is wrong to blame the churches and churchwardens. In most cases they are underfunded and over worked - with many churches now looked after by a tiny team drawn from a tiny, and shrinking, congregation. They are largely doing what they can with the resources that they have available to them.

In terms of getting their graffiti recorded, particularly prior to building works or renovations, a lot of churches have never even considered the concept. It simply isn't on their radar. And why would it be? They aren't experts in church archaeology, or buildings surveyors. They are just a bunch of good people doing what they think is best - and they'd be as horrified as anyone else out there if they thought they were doing long term damage to the buildings they so very clearly love. So where then does the blame lie - because it really is finger pointing time. Because I'm fed up with walking into churches to find our history literally falling from the walls. I'm fed up with picking up the fragments of the past from the floor; fragments that didn't have to be there in the first place. I'm fed up with the look of horror on the churchwarden's faces when you have to break it to them that their own parish past is literally slipping through their fingers, and that what they now see before their eyes will be lost long before their own grandchildren ever have a chance to see it for themselves.



So where then do the problems lie? Well, if we are honest here, the main problem (and it certainly isn't the only one) lies with the planning process. A lot of people may not realise it, but historic churches don't actually have to follow the traditional planning process. Unlike us mere mortals they don't have to apply for planning permission via the local authority, and follow national planning legislation. Instead, due to an agreement drawn up way back in the mists of time, churches have to submit their plans to their local Diocese Advisory Committee (DAC), who will, if they are satisfied, issue a document known as a 'faculty' (essentially the equivalent of planning consent issued by a local authority). As part of the faculty process the DAC should also issue guidelines and conditions - such as mitigation measures based upon the likelihood of things like medieval wall paintings being present. Unfortunately, even after nearly a decade of ranting on about the importance of historic graffiti, you won't find too many DACs that give any thought, let alone conditions, relating to historic graffiti.

Now don't misunderstand me here. We do have some wonderful DACs across the country, full of technical experts who really do their utmost to preserve the historic environment. However, we have some really shockers too. Truly. Horrifyingly corrupt. DACs that include barely any archaeological representation, yet are loaded instead with architects. No doubt they are good architects, with many years

experience of working on churches, but these are also the same individuals who are working with local parishes to draw up plans and schemes that are eventually submitted to the DAC for approval. The same DAC that they sit upon. The same DAC that all their architect mates sit upon. You'd be amazed at the percentage of their schemes that get passed and have a faculty issued. Or maybe you wouldn't. Indeed, there are a number of DACs across the country that need completely disbanding - quite possibly with an axe - and being reformed. Preferably with new members who don't have a financial interest in passing their own, or their mates, schemes.



Sadly though it isn't just the DACs that are the problem. The blame also lies slightly higher up the ladder, with those statutory organisations who are meant to be issuing guidelines and advice when dealing with historic fabric. There are guidelines issued for just about everything in the historic environment - the care of wall paintings, care of monuments, care of stained glass, etc, etc. Lots and lots of guidelines. You might think then that, after nearly a decade of me and others banging on about historic graffiti, and half a century after Pritchard published 'English Medieval Graffiti', someone out there might have noticed that we have a rather massive corpus of early and often unique material scattered across the

walls of our churches and cathedrals - and that it is at risk. That it is in danger of literally falling from the walls. That some form of guidelines might be in order.

The reality is that historic graffiti, for however many reasons, still isn't seen as a mainstream historic resource. It isn't seen as something worth issuing guidelines for. It isn't seen, by the powers that be, as important. Indeed, it can be argued that it just about the only area of true heritage at risk in the UK that isn't receiving any special attention whatsoever. There is no risk register, no guidance on protection, and certainly no money available for recording or even archiving purposes. If a bat decided to crap on it, that might be a different story, but as it stands any builder, churchwarden, or even architect, can destroy it, or allow it to be destroyed, at will.

Think about that for a moment. If this had been a medieval wall painting that was falling off the wall, or that someone (God forbid) had tried to repaint, then there would be an outcry. There would be guidelines and processes, and quite possibly funding (I did say 'possibly'), to actually do something about it. In this case there isn't even a process. It is, after all, only graffiti.

<http://medieval-graffiti.blogspot.com/2018/12/after-all-it-is-only-graffiti.html>