

# Crude Carvings: Graffiti in the Winchester Cathedral

**Intro:** Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

**Julie:** Hello and welcome to this week's episode from Hampshire HistBites. I'm Julie, and today I am talking with Dr Cindy Wood from the University of Winchester. Cindy is a senior lecturer in medieval history and her research areas are in the late medieval period, intercession, churches, and the late medieval royal family.

She's also involved in a local project, collecting graffiti in Winchester Cathedral, which is what we will be talking about today. Make sure you head over to our website where you can find photos of the graffiti we are talking about in this episode. So thank you so much for joining us today, Cindy, how are you?

**Cindy:** I'm very well. It's lovely to be here, Julie.

**Julie:** So can you tell us how and when this graffiti project started at the Cathedral?

**Cindy:** Well, this was a chance conversation actually with the head of the education service for Winchester Cathedral, Cheryl Bryan, and we wanted to bring more students from the university into the cathedral. So we suggested between us that we did a photographic record of the whole cathedral to identify the graffiti that's there and have a kind of time capsule for the cathedral, so they can see what they've got, because graffiti, unfortunately or fortunately, depending on your viewpoint, continues.

**Julie:** So when did you say you started? Was it a few years ago?

**Cindy:** Yes, it is a few years ago because what happens is the Winchester, what's called the WRAP project, which is the Research Apprenticeship Programme, every year I'm allocated four students who spend a week photographing a section of the cathedral and then renaming all the photographs so we work on a grid system, and then start to work on the database as well. So it's now, I think, in its fifth year, but I'm afraid this year because of the current situation, we weren't able to go in. So we've had a bit of delay, but we're covering most of the cathedral now.

**Julie:** Wow. So are you seeing the end to it?

**Cindy:** I can't ever see the end of it really, because we have thousands and thousands of photographs and it is probably the entry onto the database that's going to be the slowest. There are sections of the cathedral that we haven't been able to access because of building work and some are a bit more problematic. The Kings and Scribes exhibition, which opened fairly recently, did mean that the South transept and the triforium was not possible for us to

access, but that's now possible. And there are various little tucked away parts of the cathedral that we're trying very hard to get access to. So the major sections of the cathedral have been photographed and a lot of that has been put on the database, but it's still going on. It's a very large building.

**Julie:** It is, isn't it? When you've looked and are trying to find these carvings or graffiti, is there any specific place in the cathedral that has more of them or less?

**Cindy:** Well, that is one of the things that I'd like to bring out in the analysis of this data. Because negative areas where there's no graffiti are equally as important as the places where the graffiti occurs. So we're trying hard to look at it in terms of the building sequence, the repair sequence in the cathedral to see if that will help date, and also to see whether there's areas that are more significant. What we've found so far, is that the High Altar, the Reredos behind the High Altar and that section around the presbytery around the High Altar has no graffiti at all. And I think that's very significant because even in periods when the liturgy changes and perhaps perceptions of religiosity change, and I'm looking at the civil war here, that part of the cathedral was still considered important enough that nobody graffitied in it. The other thing is that it was a monastic house until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. St Swithun's Priory, which ran the cathedral, was one of the last to be dissolved and we've got no graffiti that we can date to that monastic period. So, the graffiti on its own is interesting, and there's some really pretty bits, but for historical purposes we do need to contextualize it. The area with the most graffiti at the moment is the North nave aisle. And I think that's also significant because it's the darkest part of the cathedral. So if you wanted to do it on a cold December afternoon, you're less likely to be seen, although given how deep some of it is, I think you might be heard.

**Julie:** So it's not just religious importance, but it's also about accessibility. And I assume from some of the photos you've sent, they are not too high up on the walls.

**Cindy:** Absolutely. All these practical considerations need to be taken into account. It doesn't appear that anybody ever laid on the floor to graffiti because there's nothing below knee level. And most of it is no more than head high. There are some higher bits, but not many. So on a practical sense, these are people standing doing it. And I think it does graffiti good, if you're looking at it in terms of evidence to actually have that practical consideration in mind. We do need to contextualize it. Winchester Cathedral, in common with most of the great churches, went through a couple of centuries where there was less interest in them. So from the reign of Elizabeth I, at the end of that reign to about 1800, a lot of the major churches in England were often left to decay very slightly. So if you've gone from a monastic environment until 1540, where there are monks every day saying their monastic offices, it's a Benedictine monastery, therefore enclosed behind a wall, difficult to get to, perhaps that explains why we can't identify any medieval graffiti. But after that, there is this couple of hundreds of years where there weren't as many people in the cathedral to stop you doing it. So we find an awful lot of graffiti from the 17th and 18th centuries, some of which is really, really quite complicated and perhaps reflects this section of the cathedral's history.

**Julie:** Yeah, definitely. So do we know what they used or specific gender of who did it? Because, as you say, it was a Benedictine monastery and access to churches was mostly to men, wasn't it?

**Cindy:** Well, where we have any full names, most of them, until the 1960s, are male. That doesn't mean to say that the initials that are carved in there may not be for females, but most of them are male. And the suggestion has been made that the, not to disparage them, but the students at Winchester College, may have been part of that issue. But we do need to consider what drove people to graffiti, and to have any kind of commemoration in the cathedral required you to have a certain social rank. And commemoration in the cathedral by burial or by an official stone was very limited to certain sections of society. So I do tend to see that a lot of the graffiti, although we can't be sure how much, but I think it's a substantial proportion of it, is actually other people coming in to commemorate, perhaps friends or family within the cathedral in an unofficial way where they couldn't do it officially. So to have a name in there, you're bringing somebody into the cathedral who otherwise is not entitled to commemoration there. And I think that's quite a nice way of looking at the cathedral in that it has a draw to people to want to bring their families or their friends in, for that purpose.

One of the images, hopefully people will look at it, is of a replica grave stone from the 19th century, which is actually very well tucked away, in the high west window, above the roof space of the nave. And it's an example of that, it's for someone called J. Packer. And it is a miniature carved gravestone. Complete with skull and crossbones. And I think it's a really good example of someone that wanted to carve that, and the date of death is there, so it's definitely not J. Packer himself or herself, but there is this imperative to bring that person into the cathedral commemoration in that way.

**Julie:** Yeah, it's actually a nice way to remember someone when they didn't maybe have the money or the means to do it. 'Cause it is a nice little memory, a little secret, hidden away.

**Cindy:** Absolutely. And the fact that some is hidden and some is in full view, you're still bringing that person into the community of the cathedral, they're being remembered within the prayers. I think it's the perceived importance of the cathedral to people beyond the magnificent tombs, the magnificent chapels and the elaborate headstones that we see in a normal church. I think we need perhaps to see graffiti as other people feeling that the building was important and this is how they did it.

**Julie:** Yeah. So is it possible to link these graffiti to specific time periods or people?

**Cindy:** This is one of the things that I want to draw out of the analysis and which is why we're creating a database because we can then examine that. So there's nothing that's dated before 1545, and that's when there's a bell ringer called Harry Copper, who decides to let everybody know he'd been sworn in as a bell ringer. The 1960s stuff we found in the upper part of the South transept triforium, and that's the only time we've got female names. We have some 16th century, but it certainly increases in the 17th and 18th century. And given that the cathedral was sacked two or three times by parliamentarian soldiers during the Civil War, that is certainly something that we would like to draw on, to look at the graffiti from that period.

There's quite a lot of that in the chapel of Henry Beaufort around the altar. So these are the sorts of analyses that will carry on once we've finished the actual photographing of the graffiti.

And we do have some from the First and the Second World War as well. The West Tower that goes up to the roof has a lot of people dated to the 1940s and we think they're probably Fire Watchers. And so, we can then look at the records that might be held to actually identify

the fire watchers officially and then see how many of them graffitied. We do have one absolutely beautiful, and I'm afraid the photograph is not very good, at the moment of a First World War ambulance driver, who left a very large piece of graffiti in the South nave aisle porch. And, it is a beautiful piece of graffiti from January 1915.

**Julie:** That's amazing. Wow! Are there any specific graffities or carvings that we know have a story connected to it beside the First World War and the ambulance driver, or any fascinating examples that we might know something about?

**Cindy:** Well, there is an insult in the South transept, that says 'William Eames is a liar, a papist and a flatterer.' And apparently he was an organist in the cathedral, so we'd certainly like to investigate that story.

The photographs have got some really beautiful examples. There is one in the centre of the nave that looks like, well, it could look like a Dalek from Doctor Who, it could look like a pineapple. But in fact, if you sit next to it and look towards the altar, what someone has actually done is they carved in the graffiti the view they have of the east end. So you have the arcades and the aisle, and it's an incredibly detailed piece of graffiti, not dated, there's no name or initials with it. So that's somebody who's perhaps a bit bored, who's doing that.

We also have a beautiful crown with five spires I thought perhaps it's a depiction of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople or Istanbul, which is the only church I know with the five spires, but it could equally be a crown. Beautiful, delicate piece of carving. But in fact, unlike a lot of other places with graffiti, and this is the thing is to reach out with the graffiti and the cathedral and talk to other people – we have very few human figures. We've got probably one or two. We have a little town scene in 3D from 1799. Is that somebody bringing their home into the cathedral? We have somebody who's carved in great depth from 1651 the outline of a church that I don't believe is the cathedral. And is that somebody bringing their parish church into the commemoration of the cathedral?

We have an awful lot of graffiti in the cathedral, but most of it is actually names and initials. Very few pictorial examples. Whereas some graffiti in places like Norfolk is ships and things like that, in Winchester it's mainly names and initials, which makes me think that the idea of commemoration for these people is what was intended by the graffiti rather than anything else. Whether the modern graffiti that's still going on, which is inferior in quality, I have to say, is people wanting to bring themselves into the community of the cathedral in a religious sense, or is it more kind of 'I was here', is hard to say. But graffiti is continuing.

**Julie:** Looking at some of these graffities, some of them are quite deep and I'm just wondering, it must have taken so much time and I don't know what they used?

**Cindy:** Yes. Some of them are incredibly large and incredibly deep. Some must have used some kind of chisel. But if you look carefully at the graffiti, you can actually see how a lot of it was made. And so they tended to gouge a hole, and then joined between the holes to create the letter. And we can see that because some are unfinished. Some bits of graffiti are made with a square and compass and the daisy wheel designs are like that, and we have a few of those, but not that many. And none of them are associated with entrances in or out of the cathedral, so I'm afraid I rather debunk the idea of them being some kind of magical protection to the cathedral. I think the cathedral has enough protection of its own. But some of it must have been done with quite heavy tools. And then it must have taken quite a lot of time

and a lot of noise, yet they were able to do it. So I think this lack of authority in that 250 year period is how they were able to do it.

**Julie:** Yeah. So you've touched upon why the graffiti is important, but can you say something more about why it's historically important and what it can reveal about the past and how it might be significant for future studies?

**Cindy:** Well, it's a really good point that, Julie actually, because if you go to the cathedral today and the cathedral guides are really taking on board the idea of the graffiti. But if you go into any major church and you have a tour around it, you're going to be shown the major tombs, the major chapels, the major headstones and everything else. And they will tell the story of the cathedral through those people. And that is absolutely valid. But if you start to look at the cathedral through the graffiti, what you see is another level of society and how they viewed the cathedral. So we have the great and the good in the cathedral who are commemorated, so the bishops, the military commemoration in Winchester Cathedral particularly, people like Jane Austen, who was only buried there because she died in The Close.<sup>1</sup> So you have to have that kind of connection to either society in Hampshire, Winchester, or a link to the cathedral. But that's just one part of the perception of the cathedral to the people in the past. And the graffiti can show us that it is not just the great, the good and the elite in the area that valued the cathedral for commemoration. And so if you start to look at the cathedral through the graffiti, you can see how, although it is an important building, it is not actually an elite one. And that its draw and importance was to everyone in society, not just the elites that have these magnificent tombs and everything else. And I think that's actually a really interesting way of reviewing how to look at these important church buildings, we do tend to look at them in terms of their official elite tombs and monuments.

And perhaps we need to add into that the idea of history from below. This is the history of undocumented people who are actually leaving their mark in an elite building and add a dimension to its history that will only make it richer.

**Julie:** Yeah, it's everyday people who are actually living in the walls of the cathedral.

**Cindy:** Absolutely. And they live in the walls in terms of commemoration, because most commemoration still happens in the churches that the Queen and important people are prayed for, but then everybody is included in the prayers and here we have is everybody else below certain levels saying 'I'm here as well. And I want to be included.'

**Julie:** Yeah, it's quite an important part of our past and our heritage and actually taking the time to look at this and document it to include everyone.

**Cindy:** Absolutely. Yes. I think it's an important aspect. I mean, there is the whole issue of – it is unofficial. And as of, I think in the 1970s, there was an Act of Parliament which said it's actually illegal to deface certain buildings. So it's a bit of a problem now. And I have to say that the graffiti of the modern era is very often differently done. I think that the church is now policed much more so that it's not so easy to do the big deep ones. But churches are not museums. Churches are living buildings that all reflect the age in which they are. And so the big dilemma, and there is no answer to this, is whether graffiti should stop now because we don't want it done or whether it has to be done in the same kind of underhand way and

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen died in College Street, near the Cathedral Close.

secretive way that it's always been done for the historians and the people in the future. And I don't think there's an easy answer to that. And one example is the image of the First World War graffiti by this George Porter from Spennymoor, is that it has been scratched over by modern graffiti and therefore, from my perspective, is looking like it's been defaced. I have an opinion on that, but in a hundred years' time, the person who's graffitied over it might actually be more important to the historian than George Porter. It's a really difficult dilemma and I'm not sure there's an easy answer to it, but it's a discussion and conversation that needs to be ongoing really.

**Julie:** Absolutely. I wonder what everyone else might actually think about that. But if our listeners have any opinions upon this dilemma or debate, please comment on social media. It's an interesting dilemma, isn't it? Because we look at the past in one way and in the future, they will look at it differently.

**Cindy:** Absolutely. We as a generation don't have any right to say that the history that we see today is more important than the history they'll see in the future. People move on and things move on and if somebody had looked at the graffiti say in the 1950s, they'd probably have a very, very different opinion than we have today. Who's right and who's wrong, the answer is that things have to be reassessed in every generation.

Graffiti done by these people who probably did it very surreptitiously, a lot of them, with one aim in mind, which is normally I would think commemoration, is now being used for this purpose. I'm not sure they would ever have thought it possible that we would look at it like this, but graffiti is worth considering because it's part of the history of the building. And it speaks of people in the past in a different way that is just as valuable and we should use it and discuss it for that very reason. And I'm a person who has done a lot of work on the chantry chapels in Winchester Cathedral. They're immensely interesting. Yet, I can get equally as excited about the graffiti, because this is a whole group of people that otherwise have disappeared from history. And graffiti gives us an opportunity to acknowledge them and acknowledge their existence and why they did what they did and the importance of the cathedral in their lives and in people's deaths in all periods of history.

**Julie:** So I have to ask, do you have a favourite from the cathedral?

**Cindy:** I do think it's J. Packer's little gravestone. But there is two very odd pieces of graffiti that I have an opinion on and the head of the guides at the cathedral rolled his eyes when I said this, that I think is an insulting stone from the Civil War. And I think it is actually a rude version of a Puritan woman showing her bare-chested. Highly speculative perhaps on my part, but I think it's worth considering that it might be another insulting stone. It's one of the pictures. See what you think.

**Julie:** Yeah. I do love it. It's so different. Is this going to be online, accessible for everyone to see when it's done?

**Cindy:** Well, obviously all the data and all the photographs will be given to the cathedral. I know that other cathedrals are making their graffiti available online and it's certainly something that I think the cathedral and I would like to do. It's not something we want to keep to ourselves. It's an immense amount of data that I think is actually really important. So certainly, it's something that we would talk about how we can make it accessible. But if nothing else, then we'll make perhaps the more unusual ones accessible to the public at least.



It's certainly not our intention to keep this to ourselves. We really would like this to be out in the public domain.

**Julie:** It's almost like a little treasure hunt going around the cathedral, trying to spot the graffiti being a bit like 'Oh, where is this one? Where's this one? This is this a new one.'

**Cindy:** What a great idea. I might suggest that, a graffiti tour.

**Julie:** Yeah. I love a good treasure hunt, you know, go and find a Dalek. That would be quite interesting.

**Cindy:** Yeah. The Dalek is another favourite of mine. I do quite like that.

**Julie:** It looks so much like a Dalek! But I can see that it also fits the ceiling of the nave as well. Is there anything else you would like to share about the project?

**Cindy:** I'd like to thank all the students who've got involved with it and the cathedral for their help. And what's amazing is that within a couple of hours of looking at it, they all say that they can't go anywhere now, especially into other churches, without looking for graffiti, I'm afraid it has rather changed their perception. Which is absolutely brilliant. It's a fantastic project and it's opened up for me so many areas of new history, and some new contacts because other cathedrals and other churches are doing the same sort of thing. And the big importance from this is that we don't just collect all the photographs, we actually do the analysis that will help bring out these people in the past even more.

**Julie:** Thank you so much for joining us. It's been fascinating. And for our listeners, if you want to see the photos we've been discussing, please visit the website. If you have any photos yourself of graffiti in the cathedral or anywhere else in Hampshire, please share with us in social media. That would be great.

**Outro:** We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, [winchesterheritageopendays.org](http://winchesterheritageopendays.org), click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you for listening.