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Masons' Marks at Gloucester Cathedral Tower

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MASONS' MARKS ON GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL TOWER

Introduction

Mason's marks, or banker marks as working masons call them, are well-known from medieval buildings. Understanding of such marks has not progressed greatly in 200 years of enthusiastic study by scholars (Harvey 1954, xlix). It is, however, generally accepted that marks were used throughout the medieval period by itinerant masons on piece-work to control the quality and quantity of their work. Another theory is that the marks were used to denote the beginning and end of a period of work. A survey of the marks on the 15th-century tower of Bradford cathedral, whilst it does not confirm the purpose of the marks, gives a sample of the types of marks that late medieval masons were using (Roberts 1994).

At Gloucester cathedral there are various records but there is still great scope for systematic study. The Gloucestershire Collection, in Gloucester library, includes early 19th-century drawings and early 20th-century rubbings of masons' marks at the cathedral (R. Austin, *Cat. of the Gloucestershire Collection* 1928, no. 3626; supplementary cat. 1928–55, no. 2200); the drawings are illustrated in *Archaeologia* 30, p. 120. The cathedral bookshop sells a photocopied sheet (undated; by C.C. Elam) of masons' marks at Gloucester: though over-reduced and of poor quality it does at least give an idea of the enormous variety of marks and their different date. Masons' marks are still used today as a 'signature'; a list of recent marks has been published in the *Friends of Gloucester Cathedral Annual Report for 1994*.

Even with those marks which have been recorded, little attempt has been made to select them archaeologically and eliminate those of a secondary nature in order to provide a dated catalogue. However, most of the people who have worked for any length of time on the fabric of the cathedral have a working knowledge of the date of the most common types. This note is intended only to draw attention to the unusual set of marks found on the cathedral tower during restoration in the years 1990–4. A definitive work on the masons' marks at Gloucester, as has been said, is still needed.

Gloucester Cathedral Tower

During repairs to the cathedral tower a number of banker marks were recorded by Pascal Mych-lysin, the head mason. As no drawn survey of the tower was available, only the general position of each type of mark, rather than the exact location of each example, was noted. The marks have been copied in rubbings (hence the double line) and are shown oriented as found. All the marks were scratched on the stone and were not deeply grooved. They can be divided into three groups.

Group 1 (Fig. 1: nos. 1–14). These were all noted on the upper frame band of the trefoil tracery panels on the top two stages of the tower and, with the exception of no. 13 which may belong to Group 2, on all faces except the north.

Group 2 (Fig. 2: nos. 15–24). These were found generally on the top shaft of the crocketing and exclusively on the north side. This is explicable by the fact that the crocketing is more vulnerable than the tracery panels to weathering and much of the crocketing on the other three sides has been replaced; it was only on the north that extensive medieval crocketing survived.

Group 3 (Fig. 3: nos. 25–40). These were found on plain ashlar work on all the faces of the tower. There may be a mixture of 15th-century and earlier dates, as there was probably re-use of stone from the previous tower and elsewhere. A number of marks not illustrated here were recognised to be Romanesque.

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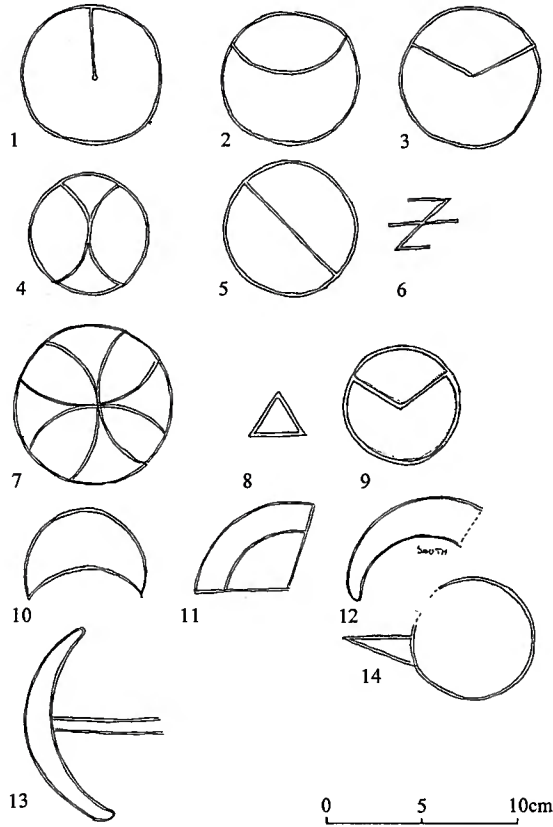


Fig. 1. Gloucester cathedral tower: masons' marks, Group 1, found on the upper frame band of the trefoil tracery panels on the top two stages of the tower; 1–6 east side; 7–9 west side; 10–12 south side; 13 north side.

Discussion

The Group 1 marks were based on circles, except for two, nos. 6 and 8, which looked like the more usual simple masons' mark. The circle marks must have been made using a compass and so required more time than the simple type. No. 6 was found on the same stone as circle mark no. 5; similarly no. 8 was found on the same stone as no. 9. Pascal Mychalysin has noticed mark no. 14 elsewhere in the building where the circle has two 'horns'; he suggests the symbol represents a pair of shears. The circle marks may have had a purpose different to that of the more usual marks such as nos. 6 and 8. An additional puzzle is that there are similar circular marks, though almost double in size, on plain ashlar work in the tower ringing chamber (Fig. 5: nos. 48–9).

The marks of Group 2 obviously represent weapons. They have been portrayed with some care, even including the loop of the crossbow of no. 17. It seems hardly likely that these are the marks of individual masons. Mychalysin noted that the vertical panels of which the tower is fundamentally composed vary, one from the other, slightly in width; it would therefore be important, when stone was cut on the ground, to mark which section belonged to which vertical

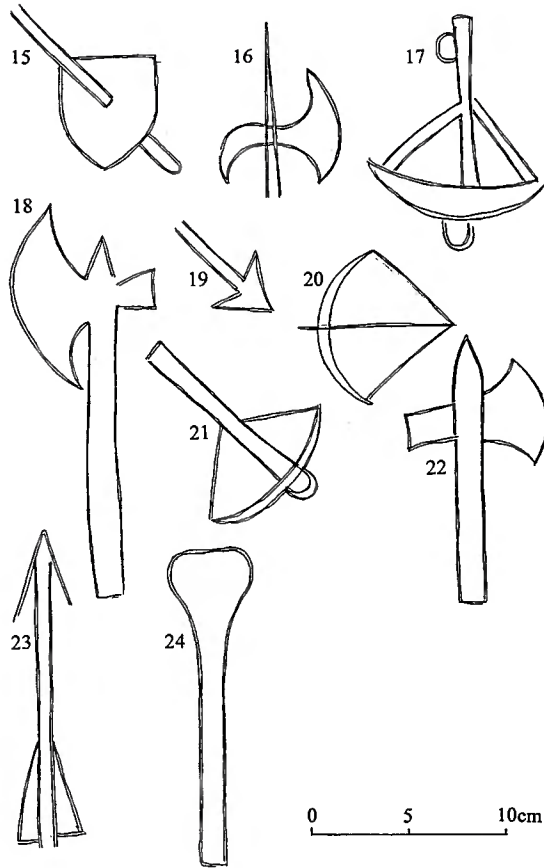


Fig. 2. Gloucester cathedral tower: masons' marks, Group 2, found on the crocketing work on the north side of the tower.

element. Mychalysin also noted that the marks found at each stage matched those on the stage below, and he suggests that the marks are therefore location marks to enable the alignment of each stage. A distinctive mark would be needed that could not be confused with masons' marks, and topical contemporary symbols might well have been chosen.

The marks of Group 3 are simple forms, easy to execute, and appear to be the typical form of masons' mark. They all appear to be different from the marks which appear on Romanesque work. Several of these marks are of a type used at Bradford in the late medieval period. No. 27 is equivalent to Bradford no. 22, 32 to Bradford no. 52, 34 to Bradford no. 45, and 35 to Bradford no. 23, and 40 is very similar to Bradford no. 36. No. 29 can be seen all the way up the tower staircase (the south-west corner of the south transept) and in the Lady Chapel. No. 35 also occurs in the Lady Chapel, as does no. 27 (see Fig. 4: no. 42). The Lady Chapel marks are accessible from ground level and so derived from the earliest stages of that building.

The tower is reputed to have been built by the monk Robert Tully at the command of Thomas Seabroke, abbot *c.* 1450–7. However, the actual mason was probably John Gower who, tradition asserts, also built Chipping Campden church (Harvey 1954, 123). Construction of the

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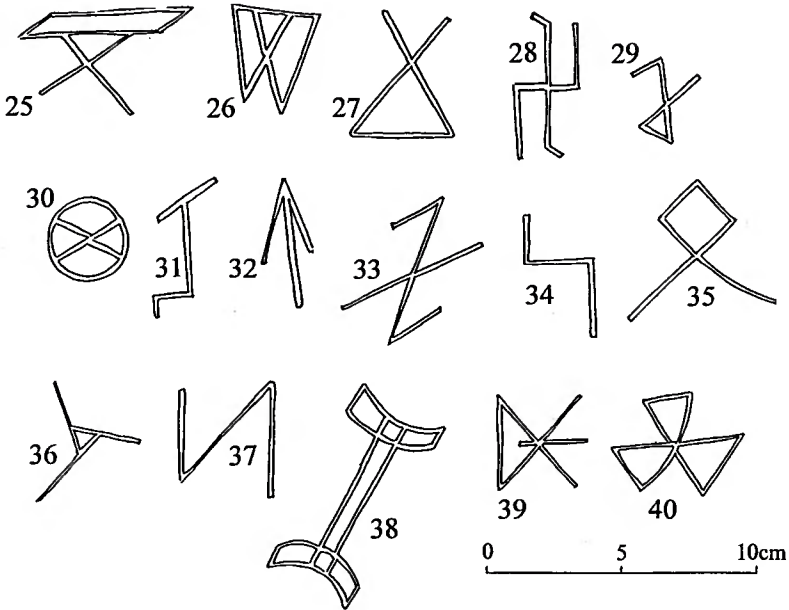


Fig. 3. Gloucester cathedral tower: masons' marks, Group 3, found on ashlar work on the tower.

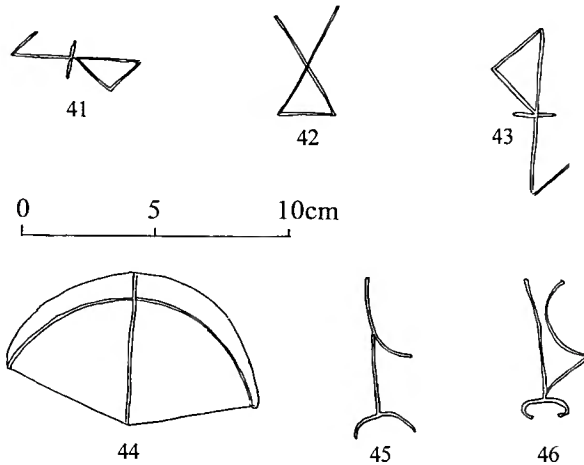


Fig. 4. A selection of masons' marks in Gloucester cathedral Lady Chapel, all within reach of ground level: 41 south side, blind panelling, just west of 3rd vault from east; 42 south side, blind panelling, one panel west from 41; 43 south side, blind panelling, 7th panel from east in 1st window bay; 44 north side, just east of north chantry; 45 north side, 1st bay from west, 6th panel; 46 south side, blind panelling, 1st panel east in 1st window bay.

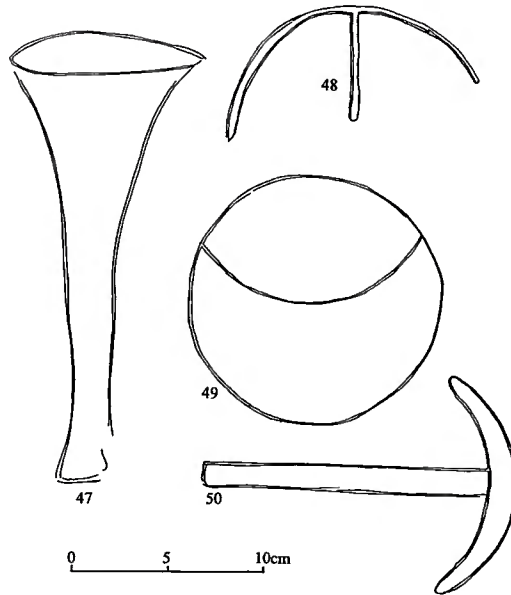


Fig. 5. A selection of marks in the ringing chamber in Gloucester cathedral tower: all these are within reach of floor level.

Lady Chapel was begun in the abbacy of Richard Hanley (1456–72) and was continued by his successor William Farley (1472–98) (Welanders 1991, p. 254). It is therefore possible that the same mason or masons worked on both the tower and the Lady Chapel.

Bibliography

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CAROLYN HEIGHWAY AND PASCAL MYCHALYSIN

THE FIRST ISSUE OF SAMUEL RUDDER'S *THE HISTORY AND ANTIQUITIES OF GLOUCESTER*

Samuel Rudder's great work *A New History of Gloucestershire* was published in 1779 as a folio volume priced at two and a half guineas. The parts dealing with Cirencester and with the city of Gloucester were then extracted and published separately in octavo. *The History and Antiquities of Cirencester* appeared in 1780 at a price of one shilling and six pence and *The History and Antiquities of Gloucester* followed in 1781 priced at six shillings.

The Bibliographer's Manual of Gloucestershire Literature by F.A. Hyett and W. Bazeley of 1895–7 gives details of these works but for *The History and Antiquities of Gloucester* mentions only what