

Cups, Circles and other Marks on Hertfordshire Churches.

BY V. H. W. WINGRAVE, M.D.

I have selected for your consideration to-night the subject of church wall markings, believing it to be one which has not yet received the formal attention of this Society. It is a subject in which I have been interested for many years, but with one exception I am not aware of any systematic analysis having been attempted.

Although specially referring to Hertfordshire, the subject is of more than local value, and feeling that its interest might be lessened if limited to this county, I have drawn upon my notes of other districts to render it more complete and easier of appreciation. It is a subject of more than local interest, since these marks occur not only on churches in all parts of Great Britain, but also in many districts on the Continent. I must express too my indebtedness for much valuable information to my old friend Mr. W. Andrews, F.R.G.S., of Coventry, whose investigations I have often shared.

Hertfordshire unfortunately, is not so rich in these marks as many other counties, especially the Midlands. This is, perhaps, due to four causes: 1. The extensive and energetic restoration from which so many of its churches have suffered. 2. The existence of so much flint-work. 3. The softness of the prevailing Totternhoe stone. 4. The lavish employment of bricks and cement in patching up the crumbling structure.

An illustration of the last cause is well afforded by Flamstead Church, and to a less degree by Sandridge. Bearing these facts in mind, it is scarcely surprising that the City of St. Albans at the present moment cannot supply us with a single example of an unequivocal cup or circle-mark.

As the title Cups, Circles and Other Marks may be thought to embrace all kinds of incisions and scratchings to be found on church walls, it will be expedient to at once define its limits. The fortuitous scratching of the loafer, and of the initial cutting excursionist are excluded, as also are all obvious mason's marks. Attention will only be given to those marks found on the exterior of church walls, and on ancient monuments;

which by reason of their frequent occurrence, the regularity of their disposition and their wide distribution, will, I venture to feel, afford us material worthy of our attention and discussion.

CLASSIFICATION.

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|-------------------|---|---|
| 1. CIRCLES. | $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Plain.} \\ \text{Radiated.} \\ \text{Spot.} \end{array} \right\}$ | $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{Complete} \\ \text{and} \\ \text{Semi-circular.} \end{array} \right\}$ |
| Figs. 1-13. | | |
| 2. SQUARES. | | |
| Fig. 14. | | |
| 3. CUPS. | $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Smooth.} \\ \text{Rough.} \end{array} \right\}$ | |
| Figs. 15 & 16. | | |
| 4. GROOVES. | $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Vertical.} \\ \text{Horizontal.} \end{array} \right\}$ | |
| Fig. 17. | | |
| 5. VARIOUS MARKS. | | |
| Figs. 18-21. | | |

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

CIRCLES.

- No. 1. Plain incised single Annulus with central dot (Flamstead, Tatchbrook (Warwickshire). Irish Caves and Rocks in North Britain).
- No. 2. Incised double Annulus with central dot (Flamstead, Hampton in Arden).
- No. 3. Single Annulus with one ray (Tatchbrook).
- No. 4. Triple Annulus and two rays (Tatchbrook).
- No. 5. Single Annulus and 24 rays (Sandridge, Ledbury, Ancaster, Eveden, Willoughby).
- No. 6. Thirteen long and short radii alternating, arranged as a semi-circle (Hale (Lincolnshire), Radcliffe Cluley).
- No. 7. Twenty-four radii, arranged as a circle (Heckington, Lincolnshire).
- No. 8. Double Annulus with 24 rays, dotted at the periphery; cart wheel mark (Kenilworth Abbey, Warwickshire).
- No. 9. Triple Annulus with 24 incised rays confined to the inner circle (Tatchbrook, Warwickshire).
- No. 10. Half-circle with 12 rays, the interradian spaces of the external double ring being regularly segmented into four (Redbourn, Ryton, Warwickshire).
- No. 11. Twenty-four dotted rays alternately long and short, arranged as a circle (Stoke Golding, Nuneaton, Kenilworth Abbey).
- No. 12. Twelve deeply-cut large dots arranged in a circle around a central dot (Nuneaton, Warwickshire).
- No. 13. Plain circle with elliptical incision, pendent from central dot (Hampton in Arden and Knowle, Warwickshire).

SQUARES.

- No. 14. Squares with single and double outlines; radial dot and 12 (more or less) radii in lower half (Redbourn, Flamstead and North Mimms).

CUPS.

- No. 15. Rough and irregular in outline and concavity (most city walls).
 No. 16. Smooth in outline and concavity (Kenilworth, Stoke, All Saints, Derby, Thorstone, Solihull, Hinckley, Stoke Golding).

ARROW-MARKS.

- No. 17. *Vertical*. Deep scorings (Flamstead, Coventry City Walls Thorstone Cheshire, Solihull, &c.)
Horizontal (Warwick and Coventry City Walls, &c.)

VARIOUS.

- No. 18. Small cup or dot with dependent ellipse (Hampton in Arden, Warwickshire).
 No. 19. Small cup or dot with two or more rays (Nuneaton, Warwickshire).
 No. 20. Twelve or twenty-four dots arranged as a square ("dog biscuit") (Redbourn, Flamstead, Penzance Cross).
 No. 21. Peculiar figures in relief on Mancetter Church, Warwickshire.

SIZE.

The diameter of the circles varies considerably from three inches in the case of the simple forms, to as large as 20 inches in the more elaborate examples.

The cups are generally about two to two-and-a-half inches in diameter, and from one-half to one inch in depth.

The arrow grooves vary considerably in width, depth and length. From one-half to two inches in width, the same in depth, and from three inches to 20 inches in length.

The dotted squares generally cover an area, two by three inches.

AGE.

With regard to the probable age of all these marks, I think we may place them unhesitatingly before the 18th century, how much earlier it is very difficult to determine. That in one instance they cannot be more than 350 years old is well proved in case of All Saints' Tower at Derby, which, according to Mr. Andrews, is peppered with cup marks, and was built during the Eighth Henry's reign. Still I am inclined to agree with him that many of the marks, and especially the simpler circle forms, as figures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 13, belong to a much earlier period.

At Stoke Church (Warwick), there are arrow grooves on the base mouldings of the tower so placed in relation to a 14th century buttress, that they could not possibly have been cut since the date of that addition to the structure.

I have seen arrow grooves on masonry from the city walls of Coventry, which had been buried since 1662, when they were destroyed by Charles II., and also cup marks on the 12th century masonry which I saw uncovered five years ago, having been covered up since the Dissolution 360 years before (Kenilworth Abbey).

There are initials scratched on Flamstead Church and dated 1709, which, although originally shallow, are still sharp, in comparison with the circles which were originally more deeply incised, and obviously of a much earlier period.

With regard to the arrow grooves—if our interpretation of those marks be correct—they are not likely to belong to a time when those arms ceased to be employed. I have already shown that they were made before or during the 14th century, and reference to the History of the Honourable Artillery Company, shows that long bows were replaced by culverins and muskets, by an order issued on October 26th, 1595. But they were evidently used to a slight extent as late as 1644, as the accounts show an item of 300 long bows at 4s. 8d. each.

On the whole judging from what I have seen of the relative state of these marks, compared with those of known dates, their various degrees of sharpness in relation to the different matrices in which they are cut, and their architectural surroundings, I feel sure that many of them belong to a very early period of church history, especially those which have been rightly or wrongly associated with early symbols and superstitions.

A well marked square dial on North Mimms Church has a date which, although obscure, appears to belong to the 17th century. On the whole I should attribute dial markings to a much later period than the cups and spot circles.

INTERPRETATION.

On a subject of so highly speculative a character it would be inexpedient for me to offer any remarks other than suggestive and stimulative to more thorough re-

search. Perhaps the most significant feature connected with these mural marks,—which you have doubtless already noticed—is their striking conformity to certain patterns, for, disregarding the minute analytical differences which I have drawn, there are less than half-a-dozen types; and examples of these are to be found widely distributed not only in Great Britain but also on the continent of Europe, and I believe also India and Africa. That this fact alone is strong evidence of these marks being serious products and not mere fanciful scratchings I think you will allow, but before indulging in speculation it will be better to discuss each group separately.

The circles are clearly of two distinct classes, the *radiated* and the *non-radiated*. An interpretation of the radiated group, which is most likely the first to suggest itself to you, is that they are Dials, or in some way connected with time marking. The evidence in favour of this view is as follows:—

- 1 The presence of radii.
- 2 Their position on the S., S.E. and S.W. aspects of churches and never on the N.
- 3 Preponderance of examples with Rays in the lower half only.
- 4 Sub-division into inter-radial segments, *e.g.* Redbourn.
- 5 Presence of deep socket and often metal at the radial point, or centre of circle for the insertion of an indicator (N. Mimms), or gnomon.

Against this view may be given—

- 1 That their sunny situation may have a superstitious significance relating to sun worship.
- 2 That the rays are often irregular as to their number and arrangement, and do not always conform to those of a proper sun dial.
- 3 That figures or letters have been rarely demonstrated.

Now it is quite possible that some of these, especially the Redbourn Circles and North Mimms, may have been used as sundials or as fanciful imitations, but the majority certainly could not have been so used.

It has been suggested that the sunny side of a church is more likely to be frequented by loiterers than the cold northern side, and consequently would be the more likely

spot for any mural defacings. Again, too, there is the superstition as to a Satanic proprietorship in the northern portion of a churchyard, and hence the fewness of burials there and the scarcity of these marks. But these influences can have but little if any bearing upon the special marks under discussion, and that there are serious productions is proved by the great care, accuracy, and attention that must have been spent in their cutting, and that they are in many instances situated above the reach of anyone standing on the ground level.

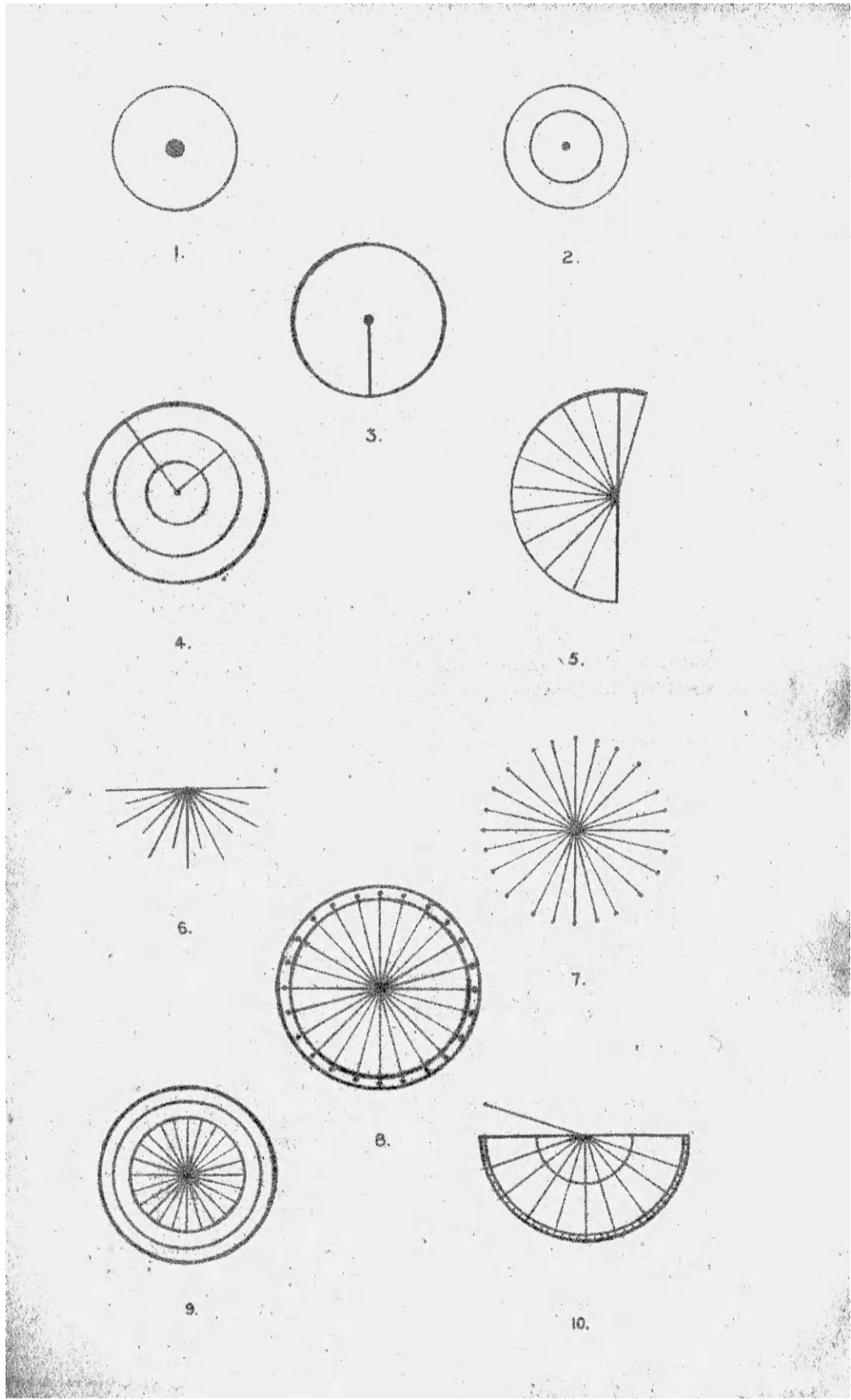
One significant feature of these rays is the frequency in which the number 12 occurs, particularly exemplified in Figs. 10, 12, and 14, and repeated albeit in different form in Fig. 20. This number suggests many interpretations which are so obvious that enumeration is scarcely necessary.

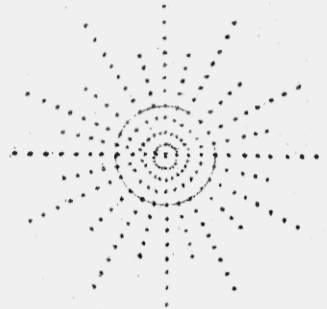
That these radiated circles may be associated with some ancient superstitious relic of sun worship is, I venture to suggest not improbable; they may even have some reference to the signs of the Zodiac, to the symbol of St. Catherine, the casting of horoscopes, or perhaps to the orientation of the church.

With regard to the non-radiated or plainer circles we have to deal with something which may be much older, more remote in origin, and even more difficult in interpretation.

They are generally found occupying at much lower positions on the walls, quite within reach, and according to Mr. Andrews one example is even to be found on the N. side of a church, viz., on the N.W. Buttress of the Abbey Church at Bath, this situation, however, is exceptional. You will see that they vary considerably in their design, from a simple annulus about 6in. in diam., with a large and deep central dot, to more complicated forms as in Figs. 2, 3, 4, 12, and 13.

A slight knowledge of the history of religious symbols enables us to fully appreciate the ease by which the signs used in early and extinct worship have persisted and become blended with the forms used in the New Religion. The circle has at all times been a symbol of importance, whether associated with Moon, Phallic, and Serpent Worship, or in connection with the mysteries of Rosicrucians and Astrologers, Alchemists and Witches,





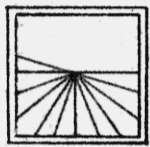
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12.



13.



14.



15.



16.



17.



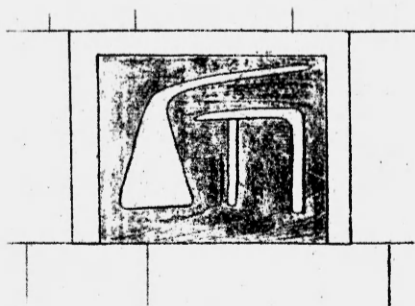
18.



19.



20.



21.

consequently we need not be surprised to find this ancient mark and its numerous modifications occurring so frequently upon our churches particularly too, when we consider the probable dates of their incisions and the standard of education then prevailing.

It has also been suggested that they may be *Consecration Marks*. I do not think that they admit of this interpretation, for such marks are generally cruciform enclosed in circles and are more usually found *inside* churches. At Sleaford Church, Lincolnshire, are upwards of half-a-dozen such patterns, but from their characters I feel that they belong to a much later period than any of the circles which we are now discussing. Still we must not overlook the important fact that annulated crosses occur on early monuments of Pictish origin and still further that the cross is a symbol which was probably used long before the Christian Era. Fig. 41, p. 157, Fergusson.

A striking object lesson which should teach us to exercise care in our explanations is to be seen on the outer wall of St. Pancras Station, close to the eastern side of the large entrance gates. Here may be found several incised spots in the brickwork, surrounded by roughly scratched and chalked circles not altogether unlike fig. 1. Their origin, however, is easily explained. In the early part of this year someone was shot close by and the bullet striking the wall left a well-marked indentation. This impression was enlarged with pocket knives and emphasized with a circle about 3 inches in diameter. During the course of a week this evidence of the crime had been faithfully repeated in several places and these remain as modern examples of our ancient spot circles.

Finally, spot and concentric circles are common enough on rocks in the north of England and Scotland, they occur on Dolmens and Pictish sepulchres in England, Ireland and Scotland; even in Circassia and India. Iceland is in fact the home of circles, of which many beautiful and interesting examples are illustrated in Fergusson's "Rude Stone Monuments." With regard to what for want of a better term we call Cup Marks, as already indicated there are two distinct kinds, rough and smooth.

The rough are found at all altitudes, sometimes as high as 30ft. from the ground, often near to doors and

windows. Although about the same size as the smooth variety they are so irregular in depth and outline that I am inclined to suggest their being the result of impact from some hard substance, such as a bolt, bullet or arrow. In the early period of firearms, iron and even stone bullets were employed, these would at short range make considerable indentations, especially in the case of soft sandstone and Totternhoe stone, which would be subsequently enlarged by "weathering." This view that these marks are probably due to some form of missile is supported by the fact that they are mostly found associated with arrow grooves, not only on churches but also on city walls, castles and even on Thor Stone, a relic remote from cities in the Cheshire Wirrall. On the boundary wall of the old Archery Grounds at Warwick are many examples.

The smooth form of hollow hemispheres will not admit of such an interpretation. They are uniformly sharp in outline, regular and smooth in concavity, and present every indication of having been drilled or made by rotating some hard instrument. They are generally found within a few feet of the ground level, and often but not always in association with arrow grooves. Unlike circles they occur quite as often on the north aspect of churches as on the south-east and north. I am unacquainted with any instrument used in Architecture which might reasonably have caused them; but the smoothing of bolt heads, primitive forms of round shot and other weapons would be very likely to produce such marks.

Whether or not they were made in these or under more peaceful circumstances we, at all events, have strong evidence that they were connected with superstition. Personal enquiry in several instances proved the existence of local tradition that they were Witch-marks; one old man in Warwickshire informed me that "they cured Warts and Wens," a superstition whose existence is strengthened by clay and pieces of paper being found in their hollows. One such I noticed at Redbourn.

Attention has been called to the existence of these cup marks at Brandenburg and more than 20 different localities in Prussia, Germany, Switzerland and Sweden;

where according to the proceedings of the Berlin Anthropological Society for June, 1875, it is reported—“they are generally found on the S. side of Churches near an entrance, and not above the reach of a man. These cups are believed to possess healing virtues, chiefly for charming away fevers, and in some modern instances they have been anointed with grease as an offering for that purpose. In Posen a tradition refers to the cups as the work of condemned souls, who ground them out during the night time.”*

The irregularity of their disposition is sufficient to exclude any architectural significance, such as sockets for reception of supports or plugs.

The richest example of cups or pit marks is referred to by Fergusson on a rude Temple at Malta, the stones being so closely covered by them as to give the appearance of small-pox pitting.

The next group of marks, viz., the Arrow Scorings, gives us no trouble whatever. These elliptical grooves are of two kinds, vertical and horizontal. The vertical have doubtless been produced by pointing arrow-heads, pikes, etc., while the horizontal were most likely caused by sharpening swords, halberds, axes, and other cutting weapons. I have seen them on churches, churchyard walls, city walls, and castles, with and without cup marks, and in places where fighting would be expected, or where preparations for fighting might be made. Good examples, but filled with cement, are to be seen at Flamstead on the S. Porch.

Numerous shallow grooves are to be seen in the vicinity of all schools; these are caused by slate pencil sharpening and need give no trouble in differentiation.

Of the “various” marks perhaps the most interesting are the 12 dots arranged as oblong, appropriately but familiarly described by our friend Mr. Clarkson as “dog biscuits.” They are common in Hertfordshire, Redbourn and Flamstead supplying many examples, but their interpretation I leave in your hands. It is a significant fact that we should again find the number 12 as in the case of dot circles fig. 12 and radii fig. 10.

* *Trans. Warwickshire Archæologists and Naturalists' Field Club, 1888.* W Andrews.

The model of Penzance Cross bears a striking example of the 12 dot mark, and may suggest an interpretation.

Figs. 3, 13, 18 and 19 are I feel sure for the most part very early marks, and are suggestive of an association with some early forms of superstition which are of interest chiefly to those who make a special study of that subject.

Fig. 21 I shew you with the hope of exciting expressions of opinion and possibly of finding an interpretation which I have vainly sought for 20 years or more. It is a large incised stone with the figures in slight relief, cut in the masonry of Mancetter Church on the S. aspect of the tower about 50 feet from the ground, just below the belfry window.

The radiated squares fig. 14 are obviously related to circles similarly divided and are even more suggestive of sundials.

It is perhaps almost superfluous to remark that neither on the Abbey nor on any of the St. Albans churches are any of these marks to be seen. Before the recent restoration a circle on the S. aspect, and a few cup marks were to be seen on St. Michael's.

There are two or three doubtful cups on the Grammar School, but I am very sceptical as to their genuineness, since all isolated marks must be viewed with suspicion.*

CONCLUSION.

It would indeed be difficult to conceive that marks possessing such striking uniformity in character, although unconnected with any scheme of decoration, could be incised on churches in all parts of Great Britain without possessing some common primary cause or influence. Yet many may, perhaps, be somewhat sceptical of the justification for so comprehensive a statement, and may not unreasonably consider that enthusiasm may have led one to magnify their value or to exaggerate their significance. Should this be so I only ask you to look for the marks yourselves, photograph or sketch them and place them on record. By so doing I feel sure that any doubt will soon disappear, interest in this subject will soon be developed, and you will at all events admit ultimately

* Since reading this paper, similar circles to Fig. 2 have been observed on a coin of Boduon (Boadicea) in the British Museum.

that it has afforded an additional interest to your archæological excursion.

Personally, I may say that I know of no amusement more fascinating than the hunt for cups, circles and other marks.

TOPOGRAPHICAL LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

CIRCLES.

- Fig. 1. Plain incised single annulus with central dot. 2in. to 12in. diameter.
 Flamstead Church, Hertfordshire.
 Tachbrook Church, Warwickshire.
 Ansty Church, Warwickshire.
 Shilton Church and Walsgrave Church, Warwickshire.
 Lough Crew, Ireland (Cairn).
 Bath Abbey Church.
 Dadlington Church, Leicestershire.
 Floore Church, Northamptonshire.
 St. Sepulchre's Church, Northampton.
- Fig. 2. Incised double annulus with central dot. 3in. to 8in. diameter.
 Flamstead Church, Hertfordshire.
 Hampton in Arden, Warwickshire.
 Tachbrook, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 3. Single annulus with one ray. Diameter, 5in. to 8in.
 Tachbrook Church, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 4. Triple annulus and 2 rays.
 Tachbrook Church, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 5. Single annulus and 24 rays. Diameter 8in. to 16in.
 Anstey Church, Warwickshire.
 Sandridge Church, Hertfordshire.
 Ledbury Church.
 Ancaster Church, Lincolnshire.
 Eveden Church, Lincolnshire.
 Silk Willoughby Church, Lincolnshire.
 Norton Church, Northamptonshire.
- Fig. 6. Semi-circle of 13 alternated long and short radii.
 Radcliffe Cluley Church.
 Hale (Great) Church, Lincolnshire.
 Kenilworth Abbey, Warwick.
- Fig. 7. Circle of 24 radii and central dot. 4in. to 12in. diameter.
 Heckington Church, Lincolnshire.
- Fig. 8. Double annulus, 24 rays, each dotted at its periphery.
 Diameter 10in. to 18in.
 Kenilworth Abbey.
 Anstey Church.
 Stoke Golding Church.
- Fig. 9. Triple annulus, with 24 rays, limited to inner circle.
 Tachbrook Church, Warwickshire.

- Fig. 10. Semi-circle with 12 rays, the interradial spaces in the double annulus being regularly segmented into 4.
Redbourn, Hertfordshire.
Ryton, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 11. 24 dotted rays, alternately long and short, arranged in a circle.
Stoke Golding, Leicestershire.
Nuneaton Priory, Warwickshire.
Kenilworth Abbey, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 12. Twelve deeply cut $\frac{1}{4}$ in. to $\frac{3}{4}$ in. dots, arranged in a circle around a central dot. Diameter $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. to 5in.
Nuneaton, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 13. Plain annulus with an elliptical incision pendant from a central dot. Diameter 5in.
Hampton in Arden Church, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 14. Square, with single and double outlines, radial dot in centre with 12 radii in lower half.
Redbourn Church, Hertfordshire.
Flamstead Church, Hertfordshire.
North Mimms Church, Hertfordshire.
- Fig. 15. Cups, rough and irregular in outline and concavity. Diameter $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. to $2\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Kenilworth Abbey, Warwickshire.
Stoke, Warwickshire.
Solihull, Warwickshire.
Thor Stone, Cheshire.
Archery Wall, Warwick.
- Fig. 16. Cups, smooth, regular in outline and concavity. Diameter 2in., depth about $\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Kenilworth Abbey, Warwickshire.
Solihull, Warwickshire.
Stoke, Warwickshire.
Walsgrave on Sowe, Warwickshire.
Yardley, Warwickshire.
Allesley, Warwickshire.
Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire.
Loughborough, Leicestershire.
Humberstone, Leicestershire.
Stoke Golding, Leicestershire.
Hinckley, Leicestershire.
Derby (All Saints Church).
Also Cottbus in Brandenburg,
Many localities in Prussia, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden and Malta
Upon cairns in Ireland, Scotland, and rocks in the North of England and Scotland, and Thorstone in Cheshire, &c.
- Fig. 17. Arrowmarks. Vertical and horizontal deep scorings. 3in. to 15in. long.
Flamstead Church, Hertfordshire.
City Walls of Coventry, Warwickshire.
Solihull Church, Warwickshire.

Tachbrook Church, Warwickshire.
 Ryton Church, Warwickshire.
 Thor Stone, Cheshire.
 Archery Wall, Warwickshire, &c., &c

- Fig. 18. Small cup or dot with dependant ellipses.
 Hampden in Arden, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 19. Small cup or dot with 12 or more rays.
 Nuneaton Church, Warwickshire.
 Tachbrook, Warwickshire.
 Kenilworth Abbey, Warwickshire.
- Fig. 20. 12 (sometimes 24) dots arranged regularly as an oblong,
 from 2in by 1½in. to 3½in. by 1¾in.
 Flamstead Church, Hertfordshire.
 Redbourn Church, Hertfordshire.
 Penzance Cross, Cornwall.
- Fig. 21. Peculiar figures in high relief, about 2ft. by 1½ft.
 Situated on South aspect of Mancetter Church Tower.
 Probably a guild mark.

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