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AN INSCRIPTION AT THURSTASTON

John Evans

Thurstaston Common is situated on the mid Wirral sandstone ridge. The area comprises about one square kilometre of natural woodland, scrub and sandstone outcrops. From the summit plateau at 90m above sea level, the southern boundary is defined by a steep escarpment falling away to meet the A540 road between Heswall and Caldy. It was on these slopes that a member of the Wirral Group noticed an inscription carved into an outcrop (Fig. 1).

The inscription, which is cut into a smooth fault-free section of bedrock, is rectangular in shape and measures 1m x 0.4m. The section slopes at 30°, dipping into the soil along one short side, whilst the longer edges are bounded by a slightly overhanging cliff and a short vertical drop into the soil on the opposite side. Cut some 2mm deep, the marks are in good condition with the exception of one small area where erosion is almost complete.

The inscription appears to be of some antiquity and the survival of the marks in such good condition may be attributed to several factors. Situated in a relatively remote and unfrequented part of the common, the section has escaped the attention of subsequent 'engravers' and vandals, whilst erosion has been minimised by the hardness of the rock. The presence of this hard rock was noted by T.A. Jones (Hon. Sec. Liverpool Geographic Society), who, when referring to the soft Wirral sandstone, said, 'in the Thurstaston area a hard inconstant band is present' (Beazley 1924). Protection from the elements is provided by the previously mentioned overhanging rock and generous tree cover, whilst the inscription is close to ground level and may have been covered periodically by a layer of turf. The turf factor would account for the irregular erosion pattern and may explain why the inscription is not mentioned by any of the noted Wirral antiquarians (Beazley 1924, 201; Brownbill 1928; Picton 1913 *et al.*).

To the writer's knowledge there is no precedent for an inscription of this kind and it was thought that the best approach to a postulated solution would be to select groups of symbols within the inscription which have a similar format and consider them in isolation. If parallels to these could be found from other sources then by association, some context, dating and interpretation might be inferred.

The inscription was therefore divided into three groups, comprising those symbols in the first line, the second and third lines, and those in the fourth line.

The figures in the first line appear to have some common structural characteristics with symbols occasionally appearing in church registers, from earliest entries to the latter half of the 17th century. These

Figure 1: The inscription at Thurstaston.

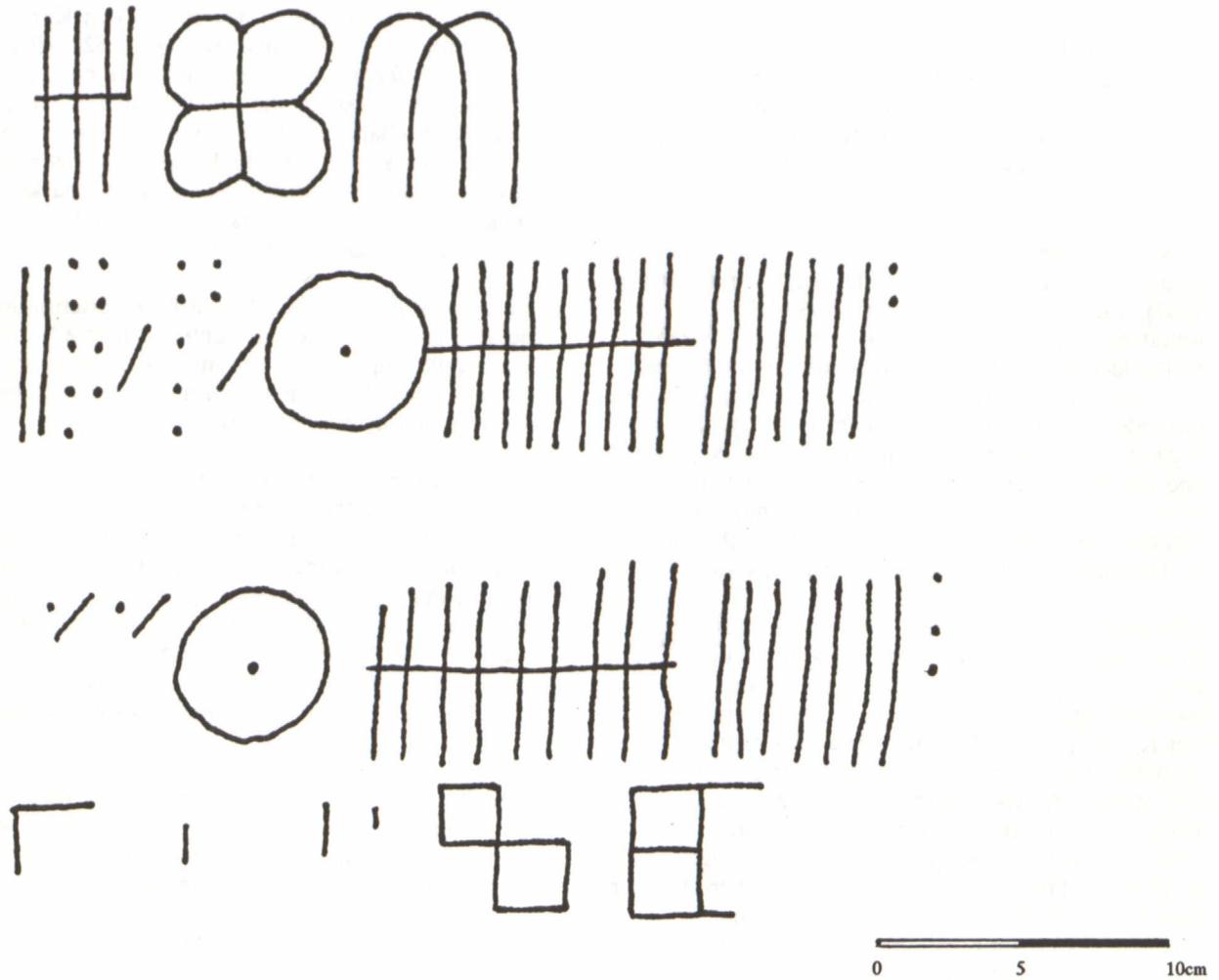


Figure 2: 'Personal' marks from parish church registers in Cheshire and Huntingdonshire.

Wm Roberts		(West Kirby, Cheshire, 1602)
Henry Hunt		(Woodchurch, Cheshire, 1646)
Anne Farrington		(Brereton, Cheshire, 1620)
Wm Roche		(Woodchurch, Cheshire, 1646)
Bart. Martin		(Hamerton, Hunts., 1654)
John Craythorn		(Hamerton, Hunts., 1678)

were signatures or 'personal marks' of people who are presumably otherwise illiterate and had their full names inscribed alongside by the incumbent of the period. Some examples, both local and otherwise, are shown in Figure 2. At this point, parallels may be seen between the second mark in the top line at Thurstaston and those of Wm Roberts and Bart. Martin in Figure 2. In the same way, the resemblance of the third mark to that of Wm Roche was also noted.

A similar parallel was found by the writer, in an excavation report on Peel Castle, Isle of Man, (Freke 1987), where on a slate tablet (86-53-I-261 BR) was found an incised drawing of a woman, together with marks identical to those of Wm Roberts in Figure 2. The tablet was ascribed to the 14th century on the grounds of dress and context (Freke 1987). It is not suggested that the marks from Thurstaston, Peel Castle and the church registers are in any way related to each other, but they do have features in common and from this the writer concluded that the marks in the top line at Thurstaston are probably 'personal marks'.

The predominance of dots and vertical lines, or bars, in the second and third lines suggests a rudimentary counting and recording system. This system may be based on units of five, or one 'handful'. Thus if each dot represents one digit, then five dots represent one 'handful'. Five is the maximum number of dots in any one group. At the completion of one 'handful', or perhaps when the accumulation of dots became confusing, the groups of five were joined together to form a bar. This is evident on the rock, where the bar lines tend to be irregular with occasional traces of dots on either side. After recording nine 'handfuls', the tenth group of five dots may have been marked on a horizontal axis between the vertical bars and a line drawn through them to complete the sum $10 \times 5 = 50$.

This system can go on producing numbers indefinitely, but it is possible that the dot within the *circle* was used to indicate a round number brought forward from another count, e.g. 100, (could this be the origin of the term 'round' number?).

The two short slanting strokes in each line appear to separate each group and the second and third lines can perhaps be translated as:

19 / 7 / 187

and

1 / 1 / 188

A parallel use of this bar and dot system for recording a 'purely positional system of numeration' was found in the Dresden Codex of Maya, c. 11th to 12th century (Thompson 1960).

The fourth line contains three symbols which are probably mason's marks. The first and second are

separated by three short vertical lines whose meaning is not clear. The first mason's mark can also be found on the walls of the church towers at West Kirby, built 1493, Shotwick, 1500, and Bidston, 1520 (Richards 1947). The second mark appears in a mirror image form on a buttress on the undated Stanley Chapel at Eastham (Richards 1947). No parallel can be found for the third mark, but it seems logical that this is also a mason's mark. Whilst these church marks bear similarities to those at Thurstaston, it would be unsafe to assume any contemporaneity.

Though not immediately obvious in the inscription, the fact that there are three elements, horizontally, in each line, would imply three columns, with each of these columns headed by a 'personal mark', followed by two numbers and a mason's mark.

Interpretation of the inscriptions is a matter for speculation, but the key may well be the presence of mason's marks. These marks would suggest a connection with stoneworking and in the absence of any documentary or physical evidence for building in the vicinity, an association with quarrying appears most likely. Whilst there is no evidence in the area, at present, for stone extraction, the Ordnance Survey map of 1870 (Sheet XII.16.25") does show extensive quarries close by.

It seems possible that the inscription is part of the same industrial scene and record quantities of stone, extracted by the masons recorded and credited to the 'names' in the appropriate columns.

Alternative interpretations, and/or details of similar markings would be most welcome.

Acknowledgement

To Jenny Whalley who noticed the marks and brought them to my attention.

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Appendix: Correspondence of Masons' marks.

A. D'Arcy

This appendix was omitted from the end of D'Arcy's paper 'Considerations relevant to the dating of the Ireland Chapel at Lydiate', *J Merseyside Archaeol Soc* volume 6 and is inserted here with humble apologies from the Editors.

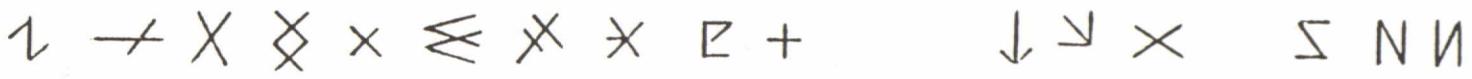
Sefton:
-1528 to c. 1535



Bebington:
c. 1535 to c. 1540



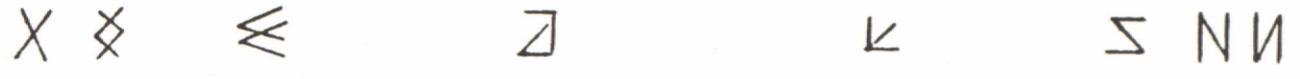
Lydiate:
c. 1540 to c. 1542



Ormskirk:
c. 1542 to -1550

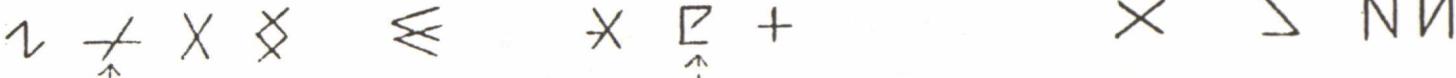


Aughton:
-1550+



Composition of marks at Lydiate:

Lydiate Chapel:



Lydiate Hall:



It is possible that Sefton



which do not appear at Bebington, were retained c. 1535-1540 for work on the chancel and vestry, and became available for the early work at the hall, since they appear at the lower levels of the chimneys.