

The Rood Loft of St Peter, Paul and St Edmund, Hoxne 8.3.21

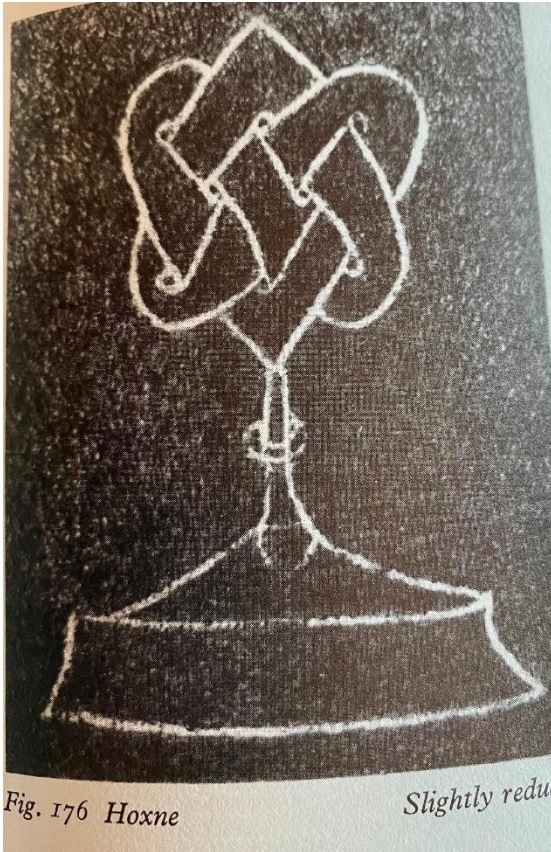


Fig. 176 Hoxne

Slightly reduced

There are few ritual protection marks in this Church. V Pritchard (English Medieval Graffiti 1967) mentioned one mark which has subsequently never been seen since, despite much searching for it.

However, on close examination of the northern pier of the Chancel arch which separated the nave from the chancel, high up and next to the bricked-up entrance to the Rood Loft (the area on top of the medieval Rood Screen which separated the most sacred part of the church – the High altar where the Priest said the main Mass on a Sunday. It contained a crucifix or rood and the statue of St Mary and St John stood at the foot of the cross) there are a number of drill holes, in one place in the form of a cross. These are likely to have been made by people of Hoxne drilling into the soft stone and collecting the dust for use as a miracle cure. The idea being that the stone here is as near as it possibly can be to the High Altar and the reserved sacrament believed to be the Body of Christ – the power had literally seeped into the stone. The well-worn steps show that it was well frequented. Often there would be a choir that would sing up in the Rood Loft. It was here that the laity would get the closest to the most sacred space in the nave.

There are records of this practice on the continent even up until the 19th century according to Matt Champion and I have seen similar practices today in some of the most sacred places of the Holy Land – the Holy Sepulchre, The cave under the Dome of the Rock and the Milk Grotto in Bethlehem. The latter of which I have seen Palestinian women scratching the white chalk of the cave with their finger nails and collecting it to eat in order to improve their breast milk after birth.



Entrance to the Rood Loft via well-worn stairs and an archway (now bricked up)



One last piece of evidence regarding some sort of apotropaic practice can be seen at the altar today in Hoxne. On the North side, about knee height, there are two enscribed and overlapping circles scatched into the paint work panel undertaken in the 1870s/80s. Clearly, in Hoxne, some old habits die hard.

I feel that the famous Graffiti, if present, will be somewhere associated with the drill marks, we just need a very tall ladder!