

# 1. Common Apotropaic marks in Hoxne

## A. Marian Marks (those relating to the Virgin Mary)

These are very common in buildings visited. They are found often on beams above fireplaces (Bressummers), beams and some door lintels. The marks call upon the Virgin Mary for protection – either as a prayer or the use of her initials as an apotropaic symbol. Essentially, the earlier marks are numerous and rather complex. This suggests a repetitive prayer, a bit like saying the Rosary. They combine M, W, A and in Hoxne, at least) really R.

A = Ave = Hail

W = Virgo Virginum = Virgin of Virgins

M = Maria = Mary

R = Regina = Queen

They all come from prayers or anthems to the Virgin Mary, so common in the Catholic Church and frowned upon by reforming protestants in the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Houses of the 16<sup>th</sup> century have these complex Marian symbols and some are found into the early 17<sup>th</sup> century in Hoxne.

From then on, the M becomes simpler, fewer, crude and deeply cut into the timber of the Bressummer. The purpose of the symbol may have evolved from a prayer of protection to more a magical ritual symbol whose purpose was still to protect the house from any malevolence.

Oak hardens over time and old oak really needs a lot of effort to incise a symbol into it. This makes it difficult to carve curves in letters (hence the straight scratches) and helps to date symbols relatively on the wood. Marks made early in the life of a beam have thin and rather smooth scratches, those later need to be deeper and have ragged edges.

Bressummers can show a series of applications of these symbols. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century a series of complex large and small Marian marks. Some of these were found on the chamfered edge of 54 low Street Bressummer and were so small (6mm the smallest M) I believe they were not meant to be seen. Others were 30cm in size and clearly were there to make a statement. The complexity, and intricacy, combined with the sharpness of the figures suggest to

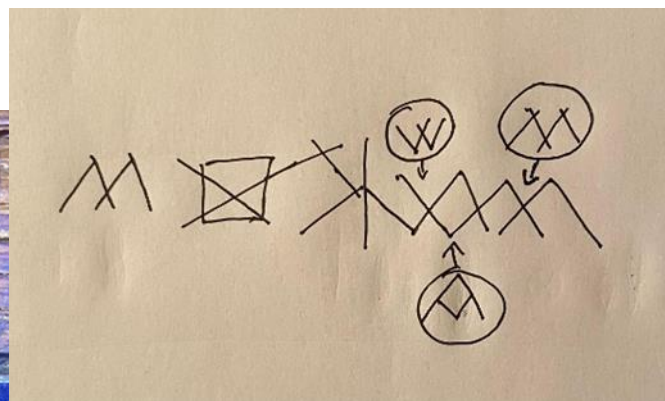
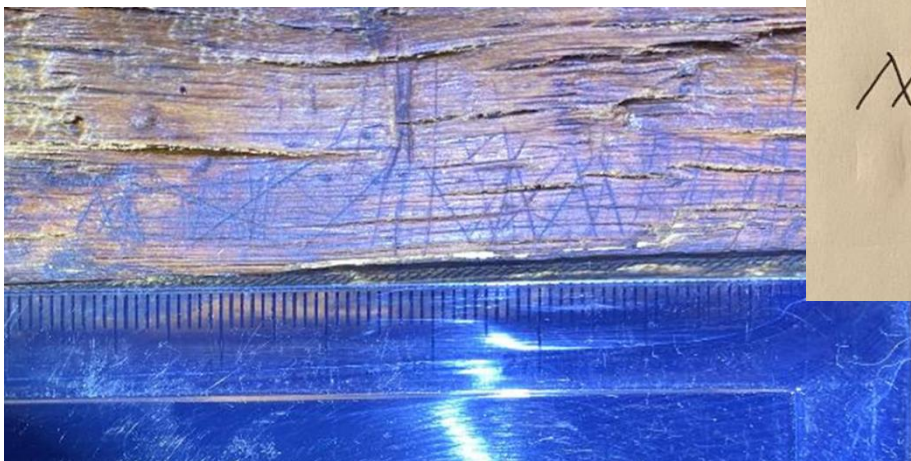


marks were put on the unseasoned oak in the carpenter's workshop before it was fitted into the fireplace.

On top of these initial marks would be found a serious of later marks with different dates in time. Perhaps as a new owner moved in, they would make a new mark to protect the house?

Examples from 54 Low Street (Early 16<sup>th</sup> century – early 17<sup>th</sup> century)





23 Low Street (Late 15<sup>th</sup> century early 16<sup>th</sup> century)

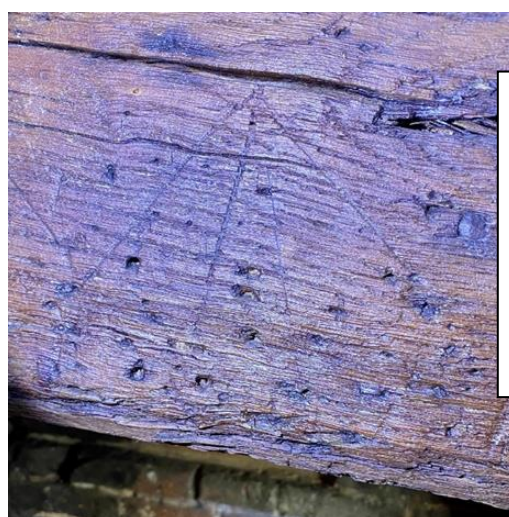


A and M  
combined = Ave  
Maria or Hail

77, Low Street (early 17<sup>th</sup> century)



Beech Cottage (early 17<sup>th</sup> century)

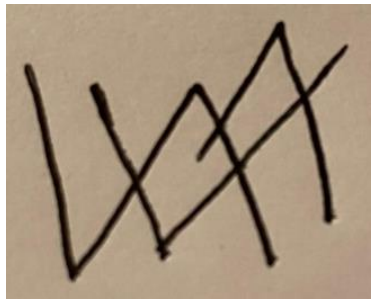


These later forms of the Marian mark were cruder variations of the M, sometimes sideways or even inverted. This was more like a magical symbol of protection rather than a prayer.

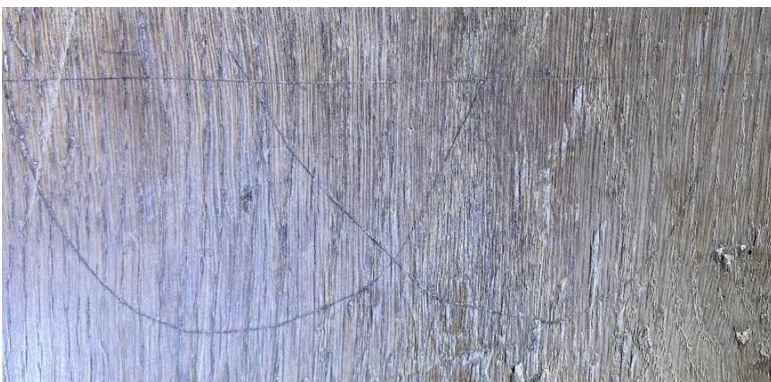
The Swan (Early 16<sup>th</sup> century)



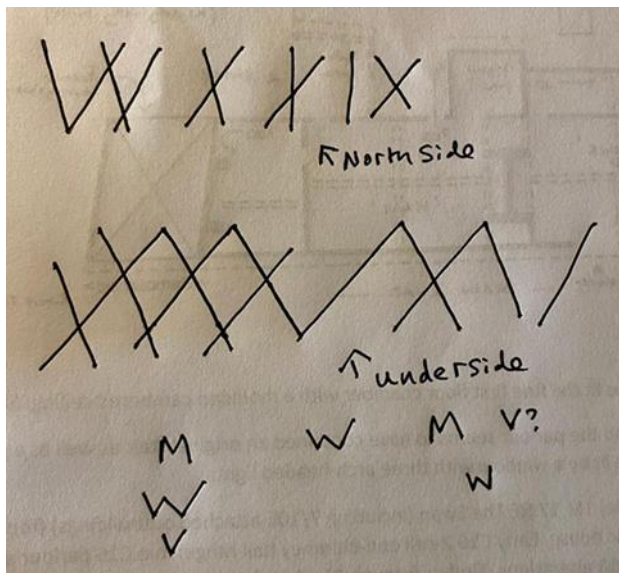
LOCKS PYGHTLE, 1&2 MILL ROAD Thorpe Abbott (16<sup>th</sup> century/early 17<sup>th</sup> century)



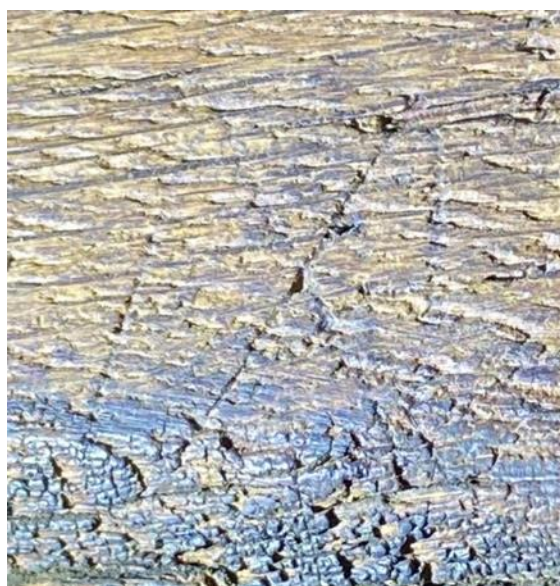
Gissing Farm, South Green (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century)



Yew Tree House, Church Hill (15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> century)



6 Cross Street (1650 during the Commonwealth period)



### Why the decline in Marian marks in Hoxne?

The following decree was written by the Earl of Manchester on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1643:

***Whereas by an Ordinance of the Lords and Com'ons assembled in Parliam't beareinge date the 28th day of August last it is amongst other things ordained th't all Crucifixes Crosses & all Images of any one or more p'sons of the Trenity or of the Virgin Marye & all other Images & pictures of Saints & superstitious inscriptions in or upon all & every the s'd Churches or Cappelles or other place of publique prayer Churchyards or other places to any the s'd Churches or Chapells or other place of publique praier belonginge / or in any other open place shoulde before November last be taken away & defaced as by the s'd Ordinance more at large appeareth And whereas many such Crosses Crucifixes & other superstitious***

***images & pictures are still continued within the Associated Counties in manifest Contempt of the s'd Ordinance. These are therefore to Will & require you forthw'th to make your repaier to the severall Associated Counties and put the s'd Ordinance in execution in every p[ar]ticular hereby requiring all Mayors Sheriffes, Bayliffes Constables headbroughs & all other his Ma[jest]ties Officers & loveinge subiects to be ayding & assisting unto you whereof they may not faile at there perills. Given under my hand & seale this 19 of December 1643.***

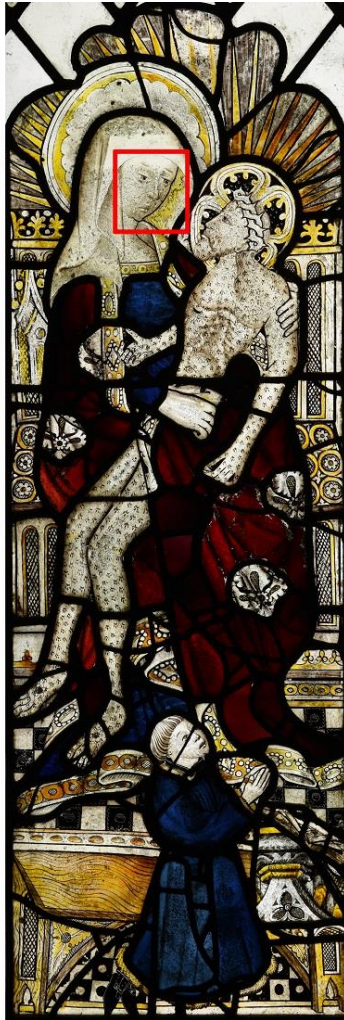
***[Signed] Manchester***

***To Will'm Dowsinge gen. & to such as hee shall appoint.***

William Dowsing, appointed by the Earl of Manchester, gave an account of his visit to Hoxne on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1643:

***265. Hoxne, Aug. 30 1643 2 stone crosses on church, and chancel; Peter with his fish; and a cross in a glass window, and 4 superstitious ones. The Virgin Mary with Christ in her arms; and cherubims wings on the font. Many more were brake down afore.***

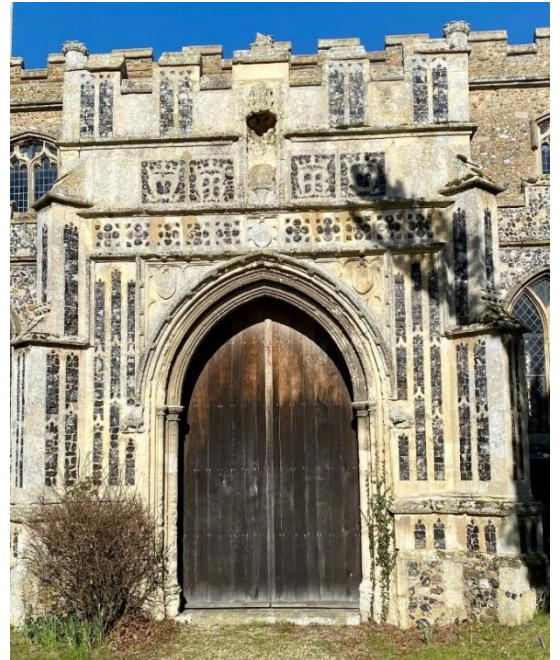
The last dateable record (1650, during the Commonwealth) of a Marian mark, a small one about 2.5cm in size is at 6 Cross Street. This was a "just in case" protection mark. The purging of Hoxne, at least as far as that regarding the Virgin Mary, was complete. What had once been central to Hoxne was now in the margins and what was in the margins was now central to this village in terms of belief. It must be noted that Marian symbols may have been used later in Hoxne, but at present we have no dateable later examples. We are still looking.



The Virgin Mary with her crucified son's body in her arms (Pieta) medieval stained glass from Holy Trinity Church, Long Melford. A similar image would have been found in the Parish Church in Hoxne.



In Suffolk we have many examples of Marian symbols in the flushwork of church porches and around towers. Interestingly, I searched local churches and they seem to be missing from them. The two examples I have here are from St Mary the Virgin, Mendlesham and St Mary's Church Gedding. Likewise, the presence of an R and a VV, although present in Hoxne, is not necessarily as common as is suggested elsewhere in Suffolk. Interestingly, the closer to Hoxne Church, the greater the survival of Marian symbols in buildings.



Further away in Cross street, houses of similar age have very few Marian symbols, they may have originally been there but for some reason in history they have been removed. It may reflect variations in belief and the influence of the Parish Church within a small area of the village.

It appears that the Marian symbols found in the flushwork of our Suffolk churches were then copied or adopted into our domestic buildings.