

The Scratch Dials of St George's

Scratch dials, mass dials or sundials, are usually found on the south wall of pre-14th century churches close to the Vestry door. They were primitive clocks telling the priest when to ring the bell for set services during the Church's day.

The villagers did not bother with them much as they had their own means of telling the time but it was important for the priest to get the right time for the holy offices that were his responsibility. Farmers working in the fields did not go to the church when they heard the bell but they might spare a moment to pray where they were.



It is hard to date the dials of St George's Church, though there does seem to be a progression in their complexity. The earliest are probably a scratched circle with a gnomon-hole in the centre to hold the stick whose shadow fell onto the wall. Three scratched lines (radii) show nine o'clock, midday and three pm; the three main times for the services to be read. Later more lines were drawn to make it more like the sundial with which we are familiar. Sometimes the radii were replaced by holes which may have held a metal disc or, later, a number.





Why there should be so many dials on St George's is a mystery



Sometimes the dials can be seen on other parts of the church and this can usually be explained by rebuilding or extensions. Dressed stones were of course reused but could be turned to any angle. Some were even turned inside out resulting with the dial inside the church.

Votive (Crusader) crosses were thought to have been scratched by knights setting off for the Holy Land for the Crusades. Fovant has at least twelve of these on its walls but certainly did not have twelve knights to send on a Crusade. It is probable that they were passing pilgrims going between Glastonbury and Canterbury as there was a very large St John's Pilgrim Hospital at Ansty a bare 4 miles away. It is possible the scratched crosses were used to pledge other oaths and promises.



Mason's marks were a signature to show who had done the work.



The Scratch Dial on the west wall.

This circle is unusual for several reasons:

There is a double, concentric circle.

There is only one line which could be a radius.

It is on the west wall which makes it useless as a time telling device.

The central hole is not deep enough to hold a stick with which to cast a shadow.

The bell tower was built after the church (15th century according to the Rede Brass inside). The position on the door jamb suggests that it was drawn there deliberately as a consecration circle when the Bishop sanctified the extension. A consecration circle was usually a painted circle inside the building although it has been known to commemorate the occasion with two dials' one inside, one outside. There is no sign of the indoor one in St

George's but the inside walls of the bell tower have been plastered thus covering any sign there



Researched, recorded and compiled by Margaret McKenzie, 2021.