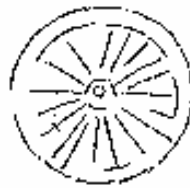
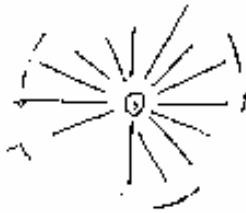


# Scratch Dials on Vale Churches

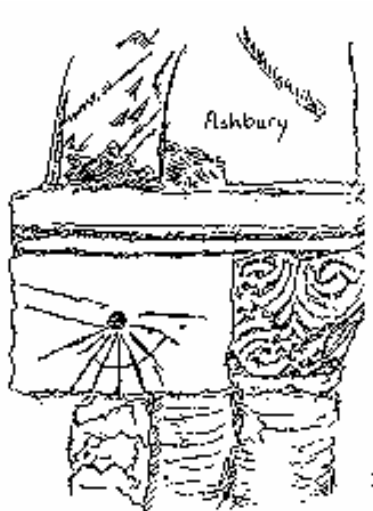
by Frank Poller

Look carefully on the south facing walls of village churches, and you will often find small, worn sundials from medieval times. Mass Dials they are sometimes called as their purpose was to tell the bell-ringer to ring the bell for mass. They are about the size of an outspread hand and occur usually at about eye-level at the side of doorways and windows, on buttresses and corner stones.

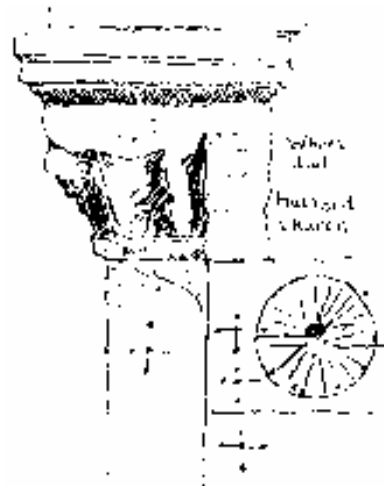
The few illustrated in this article give an idea of their variety. Those with scratches projecting above the gnomon hole present a problem as such lines would never have received a shadow from the gnomens. Complete gnomens haven't survived but the worn hole where they were fixed is always present. Early observers thought these multi-rayed dials might be mason's guides to help work out angles during building activities. It was even suggested they must have been horizontal at one time before being set into the wall as building stones.



Scratch Dials



Ashbury Church



Wheel dial Hatford Church, also some of the consecration crosses in the same location

Scratch dials first appeared with the expansion of church building after the Normans arrived. They began to fall out of use when prominently designed sundials were set up from the sixteenth century. Mechanical clocks were invented in the thirteenth century but wouldn't have arrived in small churches until much later. Even then the scratch dial would have had a use as a way of regulating the clock at noon. Scratch dials always contained a noon line as well as a mass line.

Mass dials that have survived contain more than mass and noon lines however and though some of the extra lines may have marked other services, many dials have been reworked in an attempt to show 'hourly' divisions. It was a rough measure with 'Low' lengths varying according to the time of the year. But regular time telling was irrelevant in those far-off days. A proportional division of daylight was deemed sufficient.

I have looked at just over forty old churches in the triangle area of the Vale presented by Abingdon, Wantage and Faringdon and have found and sketched nearly fifty dials. Just over one third of the churches looked at are without dials, probably because the dials have weathered out of existence or because the stone they were scratched into has been replaced. Some churches have several dials and it is quite probable that I have missed a dial here and there. Next time you are near a church see if you can find one. It is worth going right round the church as a few dials were placed facing east and west and some have been relocated.

It has been assumed that where several dials exist they may have been used at different seasons or represent trial efforts abandoned rather than renewal of older dials, even copycat medieval graffiti. They are so old that there is room for speculation still in interpreting these fascinating artefacts.

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