

Swastikas in Cambridge Colleges

Did you know that we have examples of the Swastika in some of the world-famous Cambridge Churches and Chapels? Swastikas are found in a number of buildings here in Cambridge. Some are incorporated in architectural embellishments like the Swastika meander on the front elevation of the Old Schools next to the Senate House. There's nothing sinister about this. It is simply an elaboration of the Greek Fret motif that enables the development of the 'Swastika' to appear within the design.

Other terms used for this geometric device are 'Gammadion' (from a coming together of 4 capital Greek gammas). It has strong links to Christian antiquity and the Roman catacombs in particular, from the third century onwards. This symbolic device is found in the chapel of Westminster College. The term 'Fylfot-cross' is less well documented, but usually reserved for that form of the Gammadion which has feet shorter than the cross-arms. These symbols are located in the baptism window of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, locally and fondly known as the 'Round Church'.



Figure1: The Swastika pelta

King's College chapel. A number of examples may be found in and around the structure of this world-famous chapel, but some are hard to find or now totally obscured from casual view. A Swastika-pelta is said to be found on the foundation section of the south wall, in the third chapel from the East. It is approximately 4 x 4 inches square, and probably dates to around 1446; it is highly likely that the stone that bears it came from the remains of some dismantled monastic building in the region. Fixtures have been installed recently, and the pelta is not currently visible.



Figure 2: A hooked curvilinear cross

Inside King's College chapel an example of the Swastika motif can be found on the brass lectern, just past the oak screen that houses the organ. It was a gift from Robert Hacomblen, Provost of Kings from 1509-28, and bears his name. To the right of "Robertus" is a curvilinear Swastika (perhaps a play on his surname, "hook emblem"?).



Figure 3: Masons' marks

Building the chapel entailed the work of a large number of stonemasons, and many of these have left their mark on the walls of the chapel. Masons' marks were typically simple designs formed from straight lines, indicating that a piece of work was by a particular mason. A number of variations on the Swastika can be found in the side-chapels.

Selwyn College. Visitors may well be puzzled to find what appears to be a Swastika on part of the structure of Selwyn College. In fact it turns out to be a Japanese Mon; in this case the distinguishing badge or cognizance of the Hachisuka family. Two Japanese noblemen, one of whom was Marquis Tokugawa (1892-1955), were so grateful for the hospitality they had received at Selwyn College in earlier years that they offered to fund a walkway to bridge the gap between the upper floor of the library and "C" Staircase in the main building, constructed in 1929-1930.



Figure 4: A decorated ura manji cognizance

As a token of this generosity the college decided to place the cognizance of the Hon. Hachisuka Masauji (1903-1953) on the keystone of the archway. Unfortunately the Selwyn College Calendar entry for 1930-1931 mistook the mon for that of the [better-known] Tokugawa family which is the triple hollyhock.

This manji symbol occurs widely in Japanese heraldry, on war banners and is often found next to the sun disk. The symbol is associated with a range of meanings, in a variety of contexts, such as 'whirlwind', 'good fortune', 'foundation of life', 'ever-changing universe', &c. It is also found on the flag of the city of Hirosaki, Aomori, on the northern tip of Honshu Island.



Figure 5: Emblem on the flag of Hirosaki city

Today, on account of its long association with their religion, the manji symbol is used to mark the location of Buddhist temples on maps in both China and Japan. There are two varieties of the manji; the URA manji, which has crampons turning to the right (by convention termed 'recto') and the OMOTE manji, which has crampons turning to the left (by convention termed 'verso').

The late 20th century movement, Shorinji Kempo, also used for a while the omote form of the manji as a distinguishing badge of membership. The omote form represents 'infinite mercy', while the ura form represents 'intellect' and 'strength'. One can see from this that either form of the manji would have been suitable here in a centre of learning founded in 1882 in memory of George Augustus Selwyn, the first bishop of New Zealand.

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