

A Famous Ceiling

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The many thousands of tourists visiting Cambridge will almost certainly visit the famous Kings College Chapel, where they will gaze in wonderment (as I always do) at the breathtakingly beautiful medieval fan vaulted ceiling. But many of them will be completely unaware that just a half block away exists another famous ceiling. But this ceiling is actually in a Public House called the 'Eagle', certainly not medieval, but a priceless historical ceiling nevertheless. The Eagle is probably the oldest pub in Cambridge.

The site upon which the Eagle stands was bequeathed to Corpus Christi College, still the present day owners, in 1525. Then known as the 'Eagle & Child', it built up a reputation as an excellent coaching inn during the 17th century. By 1834, it was possible to board a superior fast coach to London for the sum of four shillings. The coming of the railway in 1850 saw the Eagle lose its coaching status and it became a standard tavern.

During the dark days of WWII, the pub became a favourite haunt of off duty R.A.F personnel eager to unwind from the stresses of the air war over Germany. It is believed that in late 1941 or early 1942, a young airman stood precariously balanced on a chair atop a table in the back bar, then using a candle he burned his Squadron's number into the ceiling. This started a tradition that was to continue until war's end and beyond, right up to the days of the Berlin Airlift in fact. In 1942 the 8th AAF came to England and many of the former RAF airfields became home to American Bomber and Fighter Groups. Many of the young US airmen came to Cambridge to relax at the American Red Cross club just around the block from the Eagle, but they also visited the pub and using lipstick, charcoal, candles and Zippos, proudly added their units to the ceiling's now crowded surface.

The war ended and with the passing of time and the atmosphere caused by constant smokers, the ceiling became covered in nicotine deposits and its dark brown surface gradually hid everything underneath. One day, a pub regular named James Chainey, spotted something on the ceiling above his head. With the landlord's permission he cleaned the area and this led to his cleaning the whole ceiling. James then set about recording every inch of the ceiling and deciphering all the units. I met James a few times in the Eagle and we had some interesting conversations about his many years of research into his precious ceiling. Sadly he is no longer with us, but thanks to him and other protestors, the ceiling was preserved when the Eagle was closed for two years for restoration.

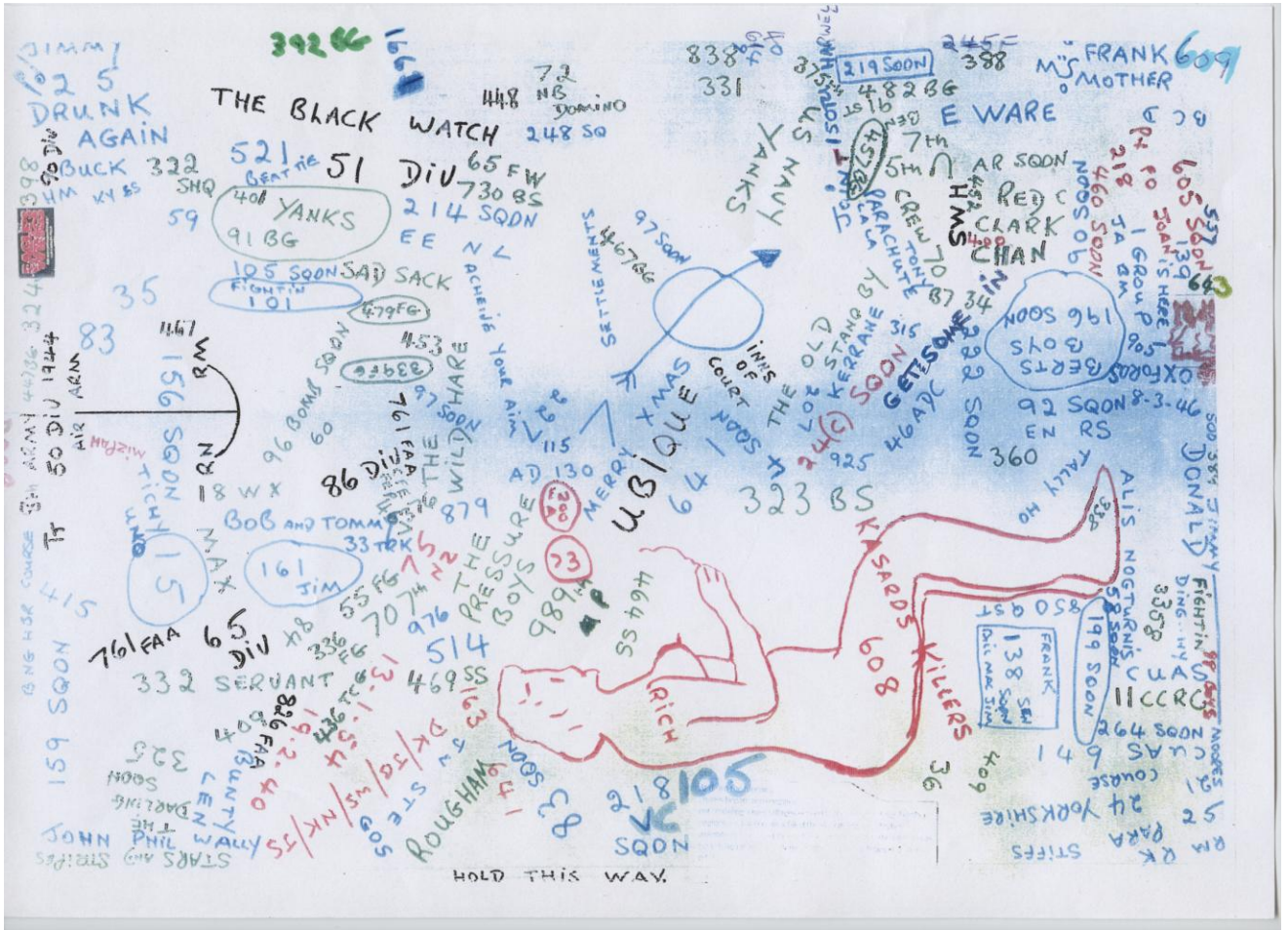
The 398th is there on the ceiling, just after entering from the courtyard, take a couple of steps and look up and there it is. I wonder who stood up there and burned it into this famous ceiling? Can you imagine the babble and noise on a dark winters evening in 1944, the sudden cheer as another young airmen climbs up towards the ceiling, slowly he uses his Zippo to burn 398, then falls into his comrades arms. I wonder if he survived his missions, many would not. So if you are ever visiting Cambridge, please be sure to visit the Eagle and raise your glass to the memory of all those who flew from East Anglia, many never to return.



There it is – 398 on this famous ceiling



Below is James Chainey's plan of the famous Eagle ceiling. The outline of a naked lady, in lipstick, is reputed to be the Landlady's sister, Ethel. Top left hand corner, just to the left of Buck, there you will find the numbers 398.





Below – The Eagle also has another claim to fame.

