

# Johnny Rotten's graffiti: The new heritage?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Archaeologists typically record and analyse the traces of past human activities. The caves of Lascaux in southern France are celebrated as a place where early humans made their marks on cave walls. The cave is now protected, and an exact replica is what the public now encounter.

But a new study by [archaeologists](#) has been examining marks made much more recently -- graffiti by the Sex Pistols now discovered on the walls of the flat the punk group rented in London in the mid-1970s. The authors of a paper in the latest issue of the journal *Antiquity* argue that both are pieces of art and both lend themselves to archaeological investigation.

Dr John Schofield, of the Department of Archaeology at the University

of York, and independent researcher Dr Paul Graves-Brown, suggest that the intact Sex Pistols graffiti may be of greater significance than the discovery of early Beatles recordings. They say the graffiti found behind cupboards in the property in Denmark Street in London is "a direct and powerful representation of a radical and dramatic movement of rebellion."

The researchers carried out a detailed analysis of the graffiti's content and its cultural significance. Though they concede it could be considered rude, offensive and uncomfortable, they contend that its presence confirms the Denmark Street flat as an important historical and archaeological site in a street known as London's 'Tin Pan Alley.'

Their findings appear in the latest issue of *Antiquity* – less than a fortnight before the 35th anniversary of the day the Sex Pistols earned national notoriety by swearing on prime-time television.

The graffiti is in the upper room of a two-storey 19th century property in the West End now used as offices. John Schofield and Paul Graves-Brown photographed and made a complete digitised tracing of the material. The bulk of the graffiti is by John Lydon (aka Rotten) and consists of eight cartoons depicting himself and other members of the band, as well as their manager, Malcolm McLaren, and other Pistols' associates.

Dr Schofield says: "The tabloid press once claimed that early Beatles recordings discovered at the BBC were the most important archaeological find since Tutankhamun's tomb. The Sex Pistols' graffiti in Denmark Street surely ranks alongside this and — to our minds — usurps it."

The researchers refer to the site as 'anti-heritage:' because it contradicts what agencies and heritage practitioners typically value or wish to keep,

and even what is generally regarded as landscape and place. And they agonise over whether or not the Denmark Street property should become a conventional heritage site with a blue plaque to mark its historical significance.

But as the authors say: "We feel justified in sticking our tongues out at the heritage establishment and suggesting that punk's iconoclasm provides the context for conservation decision-making. Our call is for something that directly follows punk's attitude to the mainstream, to authority; contradicting norms and challenging convention.

"This is an important site, historically and archaeologically, for the material and evidence it contains. But should we retain it for the benefit of this and future generations? In our view, with anti-heritage, different rules apply. The building is undoubtedly important, and could meet criteria for listing or for a blue plaque, if not now then in time."

But they "recoil from the suggestion". Instead, they argue, there appears to have been an informal consensus as to the importance of the site, and, in the spirit of punk, "perhaps this DIY approach to heritage management is all that the site needs."

So could Denmark Street be Punk's Lascaux?

**More information:** The article 'The filth and the fury: 6 Denmark Street (London) and the Sex Pistols' appears in the latest issue of *Antiquity*.

Provided by University of York

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