

# Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain

Ronald Hutton

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A Feeling for Magic



*Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic*

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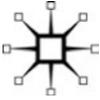
# Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain

A Feeling for Magic

Edited by

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*Frontispiece:* Ralph Merrifield in 1989 next to the hall fireplace at Cutchey's Farm, Suffolk. Photographed by Timothy Easton

# 1

## Introduction

*Ronald Hutton*

This book is affectionately dedicated to the memory of Ralph Merrifield, an archaeologist and museum curator who specialised mainly in the study of Roman London. In 1987, when he was in retirement, he published a book entitled *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*,<sup>1</sup> which surveyed the evidence for ritual deposits of material in the historic period, mostly in England but with material drawn from all over Britain with comparative examples from Ireland and Continental Europe. More than half of its contents were concerned with the pagan Roman and Anglo-Saxon period, but what made the work remarkable was that it continued to consider deposits from the succeeding, Christian centuries, and to treat them in much the same way. It found evidence for the continuation of the ritual placement of the same kinds of object – animals (whole or represented by parts or single bones), pottery, garments and metal artefacts – in much the same contexts as in ancient times and seemingly in much the same manner. Merrifield did not suggest that the accompanying belief system had remained unchanged: indeed he acknowledged that it would have altered dramatically between different periods. Nonetheless, the basic form of rite seemed to him to have been essentially unaltered, even if acts which in pre-Christian cultures would have been part of an overarching religious system had turned into what usually seemed to have been simple acts of symbolic protection against misfortune or magical attack – Merrifield defining magic in this context as the attempted manipulation of uncanny power by human beings, for their own purposes. He was expert in the medieval and early modern texts of high ritual magic, and understood its symbolic code of astrological correspondences and Hebrew divine names, so that he was well equipped to spot references to this code when they occurred on material objects. The result was a major pioneering study, designed explicitly to alert archaeologists, and scholars in other disciplines, to the importance of recognising, preserving and studying what seemed to be ritual deposits from any period, and of making linkages between those from different ages.

Ralph Merrifield died in 1995, and this was his last book. A quarter of a century after its publication, in 2012, one of the most distinguished archaeologists to specialise in British medieval material, Roberta Gilchrist, reviewed its message with the comment that ‘there has been a stubborn reluctance to address this phenomenon in relation to later medieval archaeology’: in this context the later Middle Ages can be taken as commencing in about the year 1000.<sup>2</sup> Her observation is even more true of early modern and modern archaeology, while historians, even now often reluctant to engage with material evidence at all, have been yet more inclined to ignore the implications of Merrifield’s work. Nonetheless, when a top-ranking scholar like Gilchrist expresses concern about an issue, that is a sign in itself that it is emerging into greater prominence. Gilchrist also paid due tribute to the importance of the work of researchers in the field who operated outside mainstream academic disciplines. Moreover, in the remainder of her book, she made full use of the existing archaeological data for magical acts in England during the later medieval period. In particular she drew attention to the presence of objects in graves which seemed to represent wands and amulets, believed to have a protective significance; to the placement of rings, pieces of glass, stones, crystals, pots and brooches in post holes and floors, possibly as foundation deposits; and to the burial of disused fonts and paternoster beads in a church floor. She also performed a considerable service to other researchers by providing a complete catalogue of materials found in buildings which seemed to have been placed there to repel harm and attract good fortune.<sup>3</sup>

Disciplinary tradition, however, dies hard. Specialists in the archaeology of ancient Europe, from the Old Stone Age to the conversion to Christianity, have always been accustomed to the idea that its peoples made deposits of objects in earth, water, or human structures for symbolic reasons. There seems, however, to have been an inherent assumption that Christians did not, and also that magical practices during the Christian period, though there was an acknowledgement that they had existed, would not normally leave identifiable physical remains. During the past forty years there has been a tremendous increase in interest among professionals in the history of magic in medieval and early modern Europe. The early modern trials for witchcraft, defined there as the presumed use of magical means by some human beings to injure others, usually as part of an adopted allegiance to Satan and with demonic assistance, have become one of the biggest growth areas for study by cultural historians, in Britain as elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Medieval European magic of the learned, ceremonial sort, while not attracting as much attention, has still recently blossomed as a focus of increasing academic interest, and again, this includes Britain.<sup>5</sup> This work, however, has been carried out by historians working in the conventional manner, from texts, and with little reference to material evidence. Conversely, historians of late medieval and early modern English religion have now come to pay

a great deal of attention to physical remains from the period as sources for patterns of piety, but have shown little or no interest in magic.<sup>6</sup> Popular magic in Britain during the medieval and early modern centuries has been given some treatment, of good quality, but again, this has focused on texts.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, in view of all this, when solid objects have been studied in relation to magic, they tend to be those with a textual component. Into that category would fall Don Skemer's fine monograph on the use of written words to bless and protect people and places in Western Europe during the later Middle Ages, and the work of Mindy McLeod and Bernard Mees on the use of German and Scandinavian runes for that purpose.<sup>8</sup>

Despite all this, individual pieces of archaeology have sometimes impinged on the history of ritual acts in Christian Britain and have thus attracted a significant amount of attention. One of these was the study made by David Stocker and Paul Everson, published in 2003, of depositions in water in the central Witham Valley of Lincolnshire.<sup>9</sup> Ralph Merrifield had drawn attention to the number of weapons, spanning between them the whole medieval period, found in the Thames at London, and noted that these objects were also dedicated at saints' shrines at the same time. He therefore suggested that they may have been ritually deposited in the river, a treatment given to weaponry in watery contexts in Britain from the Bronze Age until the pagan Viking settlements.<sup>10</sup> Stocker and Everson found that causeways had led from ten medieval monasteries towards the River Witham, which were probably constructed originally in ancient times as prehistoric and Roman finds were common along them. What was really significant, and surprising, was that deposition had continued near most of them throughout the Middle Ages, especially of swords, daggers, and the heads of axes and spears, which were either laid upriver of the causeways or in pools nearby. In three of these cases the medieval finds outnumbered the prehistoric, and generally those left between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries were more numerous than those of the Anglo-Saxon period.

The two archaeologists remarked that, as the river crossings were controlled by the monks and the deposits had peaked with the power and influence of the monasteries, the depositions clearly took place in a Christian context, but there was no textual evidence whatever to explain how. Pilgrims, liturgical processions and funeral corteges would all have passed these points, going to and from the religious houses, and it is likely that the placement of the objects in the water was associated with such events. In particular, Stocker and Everson pointed out that the deposition of weapons had declined when the custom of hanging military equipment around tombs became fashionable. In that case, it would have been the weaponry of dead lords which was cast into the water as their bodies were taken for burial at the monasteries. Such a hypothesis has obvious implications for the interpretation of one of the most famous moments in late medieval literature, when Sir Bedivere throws the sword of the dying King Arthur into the lake. It is possible that

this episode reflects the fact that swords (and other weapons), often of great beauty, were deposited in watery contexts in late prehistory, with some frequency, and would have been discovered at points in the Middle Ages. It would have possessed far greater symbolic resonance, however, if it had reflected an actual funerary custom of the period, and that preceding it; but seemingly thus far no expert in medieval literature has taken notice of this possibility.

Another recent archaeological development which focused attention on unorthodox ritual practices in Christian Britain was the excavation between 2001 and 2008 of a total of 35 pits in a valley in western Cornwall. They had each been carefully lined with a swan's pelt, and contained between them more swans' skins, along with magpies, eggs of a variety of birds, birds' claws, quartz pebbles, human hair, fingernails and part of an iron cauldron. The swans' pelts have been dated to around 1640, and the construction and filling of the pits would have needed the attention, over an extended period, of a significant number of people, presumably the inhabitants of the nearby hamlet of Saveock Water who worked at a local mill. A stone-lined spring there also proved to have been given seventeenth century deposits, including 128 strips of cloth from dresses as well as pins, shoe parts, cherry stones and nail clippings, before being filled in. Another pit, found subsequently, contained eggs and the remains of a cat and was dated to the eighteenth century; and another, with parts of a dog and a pig, to the 1950s. It seems very likely that the seventeenth century deposits were ritual in nature, and just possible that the later two were. Jacqui Wood, the leader of the excavations, not surprisingly, publicised the results in an extensive campaign in the mass media; Wood, however, chose to interpret them as evidence of a pagan fertility cult carried on by witches, despite a considerable risk of execution for doing so, and suggested that the later pits meant that it had continued until recent times.<sup>11</sup>

Leaving aside the question of whether the later deposits had a ritual character, less sensational interpretations are possible for the finds, which cover a range of practices intended to secure protection or good fortune, which would have been perfectly legal at the time, and had nothing to do with paganism and would not have been comprehended within the legally defined crime of witchcraft. Thus far, this interesting excavation seems not to have been properly published in order to allow an informed discussion of it to ensue. Meanwhile, other early modern pits with apparent ritual deposits are being identified and are starting to receive such publication, such as the four found at Barway in the Cambridgeshire Fens. Two were on a north-south alignment and two on an east-west one, together forming a T-shaped pattern. The former pair were half packed with stones on one side and had a copper disc put into the top; the latter each had a seventeenth century shoe placed in the bottom. All were certainly earlier than the nineteenth century orchard on the site, and the first two pits were aligned on

Ely Cathedral. The protective symbolism of shoes will be considered later in this volume; while copper is the metal of Venus in alchemy and astrology, although (as the excavator suggested) the discs might also have had a lunar significance. Again, this looks like a rite, or a sequence of rites, of blessing and protection, but other interpretations are possible.<sup>12</sup>

Such cases as these have served to raise general awareness of the value of material remains to the study of ritual of all kinds in Christian Britain, and the potential for expansion is considerable. Suddenly change is in the air. The study of material culture in general is now becoming a recognised sub-discipline of history.<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Boschung and Jan Bremmer have edited a collection entitled *The Materiality of Magic* concerned with solid objects associated with magical practices in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, but with two final chapters taking the story further, into modern Europe.<sup>14</sup> At the 2013 session of the main annual meeting of British archaeologists, the Theoretical Archaeology Group, Ceri Houlbrook and Natalie Armitage organised a session with an identical title, on cross-cultural examples of physical evidence for magic. It attracted papers of sufficient number and quality to make another collection possible, edited by Armitage and currently in press.<sup>15</sup> Antje Bosselman-Ruickbie and Leo Ruickbie are currently editing a third collection of essays, spanning the globe, on *The Material Culture of Magic*.<sup>16</sup>

Individual researchers are also making explorations in the same field, although they tend, like many of the contributors to the three collections, to concentrate on subjects where textual evidence makes it easy to match the artefacts to an established story or tradition: a good example is Amy Gavin-Schwartz's study of objects related to rites of protection, health, divination and the negotiation of social relationships, recorded in the Gaelic folklore of modern Scotland.<sup>17</sup> David Barrowclough, the excavator of the Barway pits, suggested that the only sure way to identify ritual behaviour from material evidence is to triangulate archaeology, historical sources and folklore, in an essentially textual approach. He is undoubtedly correct, but the Barway site itself lacked the last two dimensions, and his checklist of features which archaeology alone can identify as probable indicators of ritual behaviour – a restricted range of material, with rare or non-local objects, deposited in a structured way, with no apparent utilitarian function and with some effort, at places which are prominent in the landscape and placed in alignment with local landmarks, points of the compass or heavenly bodies – still invites the systematic recording of such features and their placement in the public record.<sup>18</sup>

A sufficient accumulation of such material data begins to enforce the reconsideration of the historic and folkloric record, and the concern of the present book is largely with such a body of data. It has a tighter focus than the three other recent edited volumes mentioned above, being wholly concerned with medieval and modern Britain, and a single interrelated

collection of evidence. This evidence has not been yielded by systematic excavation and has mostly not yet been studied by professional historians and archaeologists but by a range of scholars from other disciplines and occupations. It consists of a range of material objects revealed by casual discovery or collected from owners, and of sets of markings on buildings and other human structures. The former comprises bones and other organic remains, amulets, pottery, bottles, pieces of metal, and garments, including shoes, while the latter consists of carvings or burn marks upon stonework or woodwork. Some of these have been given attention from folklorists over the past hundred and fifty years, usually individual and sporadic in nature, while most have been largely unnoticed until recently: Ralph Merrifield was the first writer to survey them, and even he, as an archaeologist, concentrated much more upon objects than markings. The systematic and extensive study of the material in both categories is a relatively new phenomenon, which is another reason why it has as yet made little impact on the mainstream writing of history. The purpose of this collection is to draw it together, and thereby to alert fellow historians and archaeologists to its significance. The contributors are in most cases the leading experts in the category of evidence upon which they are writing, and in some cases, the pioneers of study of it. Some are presenting new evidence, while some are summarising, for a broader readership, publications which they have mostly made previously in more scattered form and in more specialist locations.

Matthew Champion opens the sequence with a study of apparent marks of ritual protection made on medieval churches, an aspect of activity which has been more or less completely overlooked to date, despite the burgeoning interest in the physical trappings of churches and their relationship to liturgy. The large corpus of graffiti revealed by recent surveys testifies to a world of textually invisible devotional, protective, curative and occasionally malicious, activity. It has long been accepted that the power of the established Church to bless and curse resulted in a general belief in the inherent spiritual potency of material objects (such as water, candles, wafers and wooden crosses) which had been formally consecrated by it or physically associated with its sanctity. It seems that many medieval people extended this concept to using the fabric of the parish church itself as an element in ritual acts from which they could gain personal spiritual or material benefit. As far as is known, none of these acts of inscription became the cause of an action in an ecclesiastical law court, or of a condemnation by any churchman or group of them, and so – as Matt stresses, they were plainly visible – the connivance of the religious authorities seems to be an inevitable assumption. This begs the question of how or why this was granted: were the marks simply regarded, in Matt's ringing phrase, as 'prayers made solid'?

The chronology of the practice is especially interesting, as the paltry amount of dating evidence available assigns the marks to the later Middle Ages, opening the question of whether the practice was commenced much

earlier without leaving surviving evidence, and whether it was terminated by the massive shifts in attitudes to physical sanctity represented by the Reformation (when it is similarly textually invisible). It seems to represent another feature of the union of Christian ritual with physical acts of the sort associated with magic which Roberta Gilchrist detected in the placement of special objects in medieval graves.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps there is also a tie-in with Don Skemer's finding that the use of textual amulets in Western Europe peaks in the late Middle Ages: do the markings in churches represent another aspect of a distinctively late medieval form of piety, heavy on the combination of physical materials with ritual acts?<sup>20</sup> Champion's reference to curses inscribed in Norwich Cathedral, incidentally, sheds some light on a conundrum noticed by a historian of ancient magic: that the 'curse tablets' which are a common feature of Greek and Roman religion and magic – ritualized imprecations and calls for justice on wrongdoers, etched on pieces of metal (usually lead) – reappear in early modern England. The obvious question is whether the custom had been revived in the later age, either coincidentally or as a direct imitation of ancient practice, or whether it had continued in other media through the intervening centuries.<sup>21</sup> On the face of it, the last explanation seemed most likely, as the closeness was rather great for coincidence, and imitation was hard to credit for lack of available models; its probability is now much increased by the church carvings. Again, written curses would feature in Christian culture, like most of the other marks on church fabric, as a private deployment of rites and symbols used formally by the established Church, in this case as the process of excommunication.

Timothy Easton's first contribution leads on directly from Matt Champion's, in showing how apparent protective marks on domestic buildings were frequently taken from symbols already associated with medieval religion: this transfer of religious rites or designs to the secular sphere has already been noted in the adaptation of medieval seasonal church rites into folk customs in the aftermath of the Reformation.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the marks concerned became accepted as part of the service provided by professional carpenters and builders as well as applied by occupants of the buildings; it is equally clear that some at least became detached from their medieval meanings, as symbols derived from the late medieval cult of the Virgin Mary were widely used long after the Reformation period in as well-evangelised an area as East Anglia. What is less obvious is whether these marks were used as commonly in domestic contexts before the advent of Protestantism, and whether their much greater abundance from later buildings is merely a consequence of more abundant surviving material. Certainly they were starting to make the crossing to secular contexts by the early Tudor period, as evinced by the presence of some on the timbers of the warship 'Mary Rose', constructed between 1509 and 1511, and on a wooden bowl left in it when it sank in 1545.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the survival of late medieval secular

buildings is probably sufficient to suggest that the use of such symbols in domestic settings did burgeon in the early modern period.

Turning now to objects rather than designs, the collection continues with John Billingsley's chapter on carved stone heads. The existence of enigmatic examples of these, at various places in Britain but especially the North of England, had attracted the attention of a few archaeologists. They were correctly identified as being both relatively numerous and conforming to a fairly standard type, with flat, pear-shaped faces, lentoid eyes and oval mouths. Provisionally, because of an apparent lack of datable context for them, they were assigned to the Iron Age as they had some resemblance to faces in metalwork of that period.<sup>24</sup> It was John who first realised that some can be dated and that the majority of these derive from the seventeenth century.<sup>25</sup> Some appear to have a decorative value and some a humorous one, but both of these overlap with another, as they were placed overwhelmingly in positions where they could act as symbolic protectors for entry and boundary points in buildings and the landscape. He now builds upon these earlier insights to set these early modern artefacts very broadly into a much older tradition of the use of the head for such purposes, so that once more the interplay of continuity and novelty is apparent.

The volume turns next to the deposition of particular items within or beneath buildings, as measures of protection and aversion. As the contributions to this section attest, these were first noticed by antiquaries, folklorists and archaeologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but systematic research into them only began in the 1960s with June Swann's collection of data concerning concealed shoes. June has naturally contributed the chapter on that topic, while Brian Hoggard accompanies her chapter with one on witch bottles and another on concealed animal remains, Dinah Eastop with one on garments, and Timothy Easton on 'middens' of different artefacts. Once more, these acts represent both continuity and alternation of ancient tradition. Witch bottles are specifically a modern phenomenon, commenced in the seventeenth century, but represent one form of a wider activity of countering malevolent magic by deploying special objects which seems prehistoric. Shoes are the most commonly deposited items in these apparently ritualised contexts, and hark back to Roman times, when they were used as foundation deposits all over the empire, including Britain, especially in pits and wells.<sup>26</sup> Their particular significance in such contexts probably also remained unchanged, as the garment which best retains the shape, and so the identity and essence, of the wearer; and yet the deposition of them was only apparently resumed in the later Middle Ages and increased greatly in the early modern period.

Likewise, bodies and body parts of animals feature in ritual deposits from the Middle Stone Age onward, but the favoured species changed over time. In the earlier parts of prehistory food animals – cattle, sheep and pigs – were most common, and while they were still important in later periods, horses

and dogs become frequent in Iron Age and Roman Britain.<sup>27</sup> These were, presumably, the beasts who bonded most closely with their owners, and dogs would have had in addition some significance as protectors and guardians of the places in which they were interred. This being so, it is notable that although all of these animals continue to be represented in what seem like ritual deposits into early modern times, the one of choice has emerged by that period as the cat. If, as Brian Hoggard convincingly argues, this was concealed in houses to act as a protector of them against 'spiritual vermin', this would suggest that the nature of invisible attacks upon households had been perceived to alter by that time. There are other categories of material found in what are definitely or apparently ritual contexts, such as metalwork (such as the famous lucky horseshoe) and human images, notably figurines or 'poppets'. These either have as yet not been the focus of concerted study in Britain (as in the former case) or are as yet apparently too rare to support one (as in the latter). They therefore feature in this book only as part of assemblages or in chapters concerned with broader subjects.

The tour of the British material ends with amulets, defined as portable solid objects, usually kept about homes, outbuildings or the person, which were believed by the owners to be charged with a form of invisible power which conferred protection or good fortune. In one sense they are virtually timeless. Objects without any apparent utilitarian function, and seemingly possessed of some kind of symbolic significance, have been found associated with human beings in Britain since the oldest known human burial in it, the so-called Red Lady of Paviland, dated to around 34,000 years ago.<sup>28</sup> Daniel Ogden, one of the leading experts in Greek and Roman attitudes to magic, has called amulets 'the most ubiquitous and visible of magical tools in antiquity'.<sup>29</sup> Roberta Gilchrist's medieval evidence, cited earlier, abounds with examples of finds in graves and buildings which seem amuletic in character. The subject is covered jointly in this collection by Alexander Cummins, considering the textual evidence – a rare case where there are abundant literary sources for a material magical practice in Christian Britain – and Tabitha Cadbury, concerned with the survival of the actual product. What is so striking about their joint efforts, which at first sight should make a complementary whole, is that chronologically they hardly match. Al has abundant literature from the early modern period which defends and prescribes the making of amulets, but not a single clearly dated example of one seems to survive from this time period, while Tabitha has located about 1700 of them collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by which time the only people to write about them did not themselves apparently believe in their efficacy. Tabitha does, however, prove amply their enduring popularity, while the theoretical arguments that Al discusses as underpinning a trust in them could equally apply to many of the other kinds of early modern objects and designs considered in this collection. These chapters dovetail at points with the chapter contributed by Owen

Davies and Timothy Easton on the evidence for the use of local specialists in magic (cunning-folk) for some of the depositions and inscriptions considered earlier in the book. This provides an invaluable context, and framework of action, for the creation of some of the deposits considered in earlier chapters.

Comparative studies of these phenomena, over geographical space, should yield further insights into the British material. In 2013, as part of the recent sudden surge of interest in the materiality of magic, Sarah Randles published an article which surveyed the apparent ritual concealment of clothing (including footwear) as an activity found in early modern times across Europe and into the Middle East, which invites the question of whether a common belief system inspired it. She suggested a range of such systems which could have provided the impetus.<sup>30</sup> The broader – European and global – aspect of the subject has been relatively neglected in the present book, largely because it is hoped to make this wider context the subject of a different collection. Nonetheless, the final chapter by Owen Davies, Chris Manning and Ian Evans, traces the diffusion of most of the practices considered earlier into the English-speaking colonies overseas. One value of this exercise is that local records there can enable a closer consideration of the circumstances in which some of the acts concerned may have occurred (especially in Ian's Australian material). Coupled with incidental references to European parallels in other chapters, it also permits some provisional conclusions with regard to the ubiquity of the practices under consideration. Some of them – protective symbols in churches and secular buildings, the use of amulets, and the apparently ritualised deposition of shoes and other garments – fairly clearly seem to span the continent, and extend beyond it. Others common in Britain seem to have had more regional foci elsewhere in Europe, for example, the concealment of horses' skulls in Scandinavia and of cats in Germany and Austria. Only witch bottles seem to be uniquely British, and indeed mostly English. Conversely, the American and Australian evidence suggests that all of the practices examined in this collection reached the English-speaking colonies overseas. Many of them seem, therefore, to have been part of a lexicon of protective, and occasionally aggressive, ritual action which spanned ethnic and linguistic zones across Europe, and was easily projected across the world by European immigration.

To say this is, of course, to invite the question of what is actually in the lexicon, because much of the content of this book raises methodological problems. Most acts of ritual protection or aggression will have left no tangible trace, and it is likely that most of the material evidence that they have left has been destroyed simply because it has not been recognised as what it was; or, when it was correctly identified, because the finders were uncomfortable with it. We are therefore left with a fraction of the data which must have once existed, and face difficult judgements concerning how representative

it is. There is also the problem that while most of the apparent evidence that we do possess is solid in a physical sense, it is far from being so in an interpretative one. Material remains may be read in different ways, as any archaeologist knows. It is the contention of the contributors to this book, and of the editor, that most of the data presented can most reasonably be considered the product of ritual action, and in many cases this is probably beyond doubt. In some, however, it is not. Timothy Easton himself excludes from the probable category of ritual the tragic bodies of infants found concealed in his 'spiritual middens', and it is possible that some, at least, of the pieces of glass in those, and of the written and printed material, should not belong to it either; but it is also possible that they should. Some of the absences in the material are also noteworthy, and puzzling: given the importance of amulets as protective and lucky items, throughout the period covered by this volume, why do they not occur, or occur more obviously, as deposits in buildings, even in 'middens'? Nor is there any apparent reason why most of the customs suggested in this book seem to have persisted from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, but some, such as candle marks, disappear sooner. The single major consolation when confronting these sorts of issues is that they are hardly unique to this particular subject area, being perennial challenges to the archaeologist and historian.

It would be comforting to suggest, as David Barrowclough did, that an intersection of history, archaeology and folklore would provide the best way of meeting such difficulties. The trouble is that every one of those disciplines may, even in combination, not be equal to the job. When the collections of folklore made between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries are consulted, a few of the material objects and markings, which are the focus here – such as witch bottles and animal hearts stuck with pins – become the physical manifestation of recorded folk beliefs. The folklore record remains obstinately silent, however, with respect to most.<sup>31</sup> It may seem that, having now long been accustomed to the concept of prehistory, we may have to reconcile ourselves to that of *ahistory*, of whole classes of human activity and thought, carried on in highly literate societies, which nonetheless escape the written record and leave only material evidence behind. To this would belong, for example, the carvings of erect phalluses and outlines of shoes on the more heavily-stressed points of Victorian railway bridges, echoing a custom apparent in Roman structures and deposits but having no known written references in either period.<sup>32</sup>

So, can the material evidence for magic and related ritual practices in medieval and modern Britain be historicised at all, as, for example, the textual evidence for ceremonial magic and beliefs in witchcraft can be? Ritual magic can certainly be shown to have undergone considerable development between the twelfth and twentieth centuries, reflecting changing cultural contexts, while the social and legal status of witchcraft beliefs underwent a series of dramatic alterations over the same period. By contrast, the data

considered in this book can readily be made to seem a timeless expression of the impulses to bless, protect, avert and exorcise (aims which are themselves seldom easy to distinguish using the evidence concerned), applied to people, places and property sometimes routinely and sometimes in cases of specific need. The objects employed might in this reading alter in some respects over the centuries, with changing fashions and available materials, but the behaviour itself, and the fundamental instincts and beliefs which propelled it, does not.

Such a conclusion is attractive in many ways, but may miss an important point. When all allowances are made for problems of dating and survival of data, the pre- and post-Reformation worlds do look very different with regard to the evidence for private and personal acts of ritual designed to achieve practical results. With the establishment of Protestantism, they seem to contract notably within churches and burgeon notably in domestic and occupational contexts. If this apparent process was a real one, then it argues for a large-scale transfer of acts of blessing, exorcism and spiritual repulsion from the ecclesiastical to the secular sphere, where use of them remained widely employed until the waning of an active and literal belief in the efficacy of magical acts and objects among the populace at large in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is tempting here to revisit a famous proposition made by Sir Keith Thomas, that the removal of most of the 'magic' provided by the medieval Church, in charging material objects and elements with sanctity and potency, may have produced an increase in the demand for magic from other sources.<sup>33</sup> This would certainly accord with a double pattern suggested by the evidence here: that the quantity of activity intended to protect the home and its outbuildings increased in the wake of the Reformation and that specific protective symbols were transferred there from ecclesiastical settings. A further possibility, however, also cannot be neglected: that the Reformation crisis also produced an enhanced fear of the Devil, of evil spirits, of bewitchment and of capricious misfortune in general, which endured long into modernity. This would make a fit with recent work which has suggested a relatively sudden increase in concern with witchcraft in Britain during the sixteenth century, accompanying and provoking its redefinition as a secular crime.<sup>34</sup> If the apparent pattern of deposition is genuine and not a product of survival, it seems that measures of self-protection against witchcraft increased as legal prosecution of it waned, making another good fit with research which has provided evidence of the continuation of a popular belief in malevolent magic as the legal remedies for it declined and disappeared.<sup>35</sup>

It may thus be argued that the material data can serve to fuel new debate over a cluster of major hypotheses concerning the history of British magic which were developed from textual evidence. Whether this is so must remain within the judgement of the individual reader, and the purpose of

this volume is primarily to set out the data in such a way as to make such judgement easier.

## Notes

1. Published in London by Batsford.
2. Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life* (Woodbridge, 2012), 229.
3. *Ibid.*, 200–215, 227–236, 267–271. See also her earlier ‘Magic for the Dead? The Archaeology of Magic in Later Medieval Burials’, *Medieval Archaeology* 52 (2008), 119–158.
4. For a series of surveys of the field, of differing length and weight, see Geoffrey Scarre and John Callow, *Witchcraft and Magic in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe* (2nd edition, Basingstoke, 2001); Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts* (Cambridge, 2004); Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Harlow, 3rd edition, 2006); and Brian P. Levack (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford, 2013).
5. Stages in its development are represented by Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1989); Claire Fanger (ed.), *Conjuring Spirits* (Stroud, 1998); Claire Fanger (ed.), *Invoking Angels* (University Park PA, 2012); Frank Klaassen, *The Transformations of Magic* (University Park PA, 2013); and Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister* (University Park PA, 2013). For an overview of the subject, see Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham MD, 2007).
6. The great turning point here was probably Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400 to c. 1580* (New Haven, 1992).
7. The famous pioneering work is Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971). The best since then is probably Owen Davies, *Cunning Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London, 2003).
8. Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park PA, 2006); Mindy McLeod and Bernard Mees, *Runic Amulets and Magical Objects* (Woodbridge, 2012).
9. David Stocker and Paul Everson, ‘The Straight and Narrow Way’, in Martin Carver (ed.), *The Cross Goes North* (York, 2003), 271–288.
10. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, 112–115.
11. The publicity included an article in *The Times* by Simon Bruxelles on 10 March 2008; and an article by Kate Ravilious, ‘Witches of Cornwall’, *Archaeology* 61 (2011), at [www.archaeology.org/0811/etc/witches.html](http://www.archaeology.org/0811/etc/witches.html). Accessed 4 November 2011.
12. David Barrowclough, ‘“The Wonderful Discovery of Witches”: Unearthing the Occult, Necromancy and Magic in Seventeenth Century England’, at <http://www.academic.edu/7973344>. Accessed 11 December 2014.
13. See, for example, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (ed.), *Writing Material Culture History* (London, 2015).
14. Published in Paderborn in April 2015.
15. To be published by Oxbow in the autumn of 2015, (of course) *The Materiality of Magic*.
16. Due for delivery in July 2015.
17. Amy Gavin-Schwartz, ‘Archaeology and Folklore of Material Culture, Ritual and Everyday Life’, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 5 (2001), 263–280.

18. Barrowclough, "The Wonderful Discovery of Witches".
19. Gilchrist, 'Magic for the Dead', 157–158.
20. Skemer, *Binding Words*, 171–233.
21. John Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1992), 28. The curses at Norwich are considered in detail in Matthew Champion, 'Ill Wishing on the Walls: The Medieval Graffiti Curses of Norwich Cathedral', *Norfolk Archaeology* 46 (2014), 61–66.
22. Ronald Hutton, 'The English Reformation and the Evidence of Folklore', *Past and Present* 148 (1995), 89–116.
23. Information from Mary Rose Museum, Portsmouth.
24. Above all in Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), 91–174 passim. See also Sidney Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*, privately published, 1975.
25. John Billingsley, *Stony Gaze* (Chieveley, 1998).
26. Carol van Driel-Murray, 'And did those Feet in Ancient Time...?', in Patricia Baker et al. (ed.), *TRAC98* (Oxford, 1999), 131–140.
27. For a summary of these depositional tastes across the period concerned, see my *Pagan Britain*, passim.
28. Stephen Aldhouse-Green, *Paviland and the 'Red Lady'* (Bristol, 2000).
29. Daniel Ogden, *Night's Dark Agents* (London, 2008), 129.
30. Sarah Randles, 'Material Magic', *Parergon*, 30 (2013), 109–128. See also Owen Davies's essay in the collection edited by Jan Bremmer.
31. For a quick means of checking this, see Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague, 1966), especially motifs G257 and G271–2.
32. Hutton, *Pagan Britain*, 389.
33. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 25–77.
34. Catherine Rider, *Magic and Religion in Medieval England* (London, 2012); Karen Jones and Michael Zell, 'The Divels Speciall Instruments', *Social History*, 30 (2005), 45–63.
35. E.g. Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Material Culture 1736–1951* (Manchester, 1999).

# 2

## Magic on the Walls: Ritual Protection Marks in the Medieval Church

*Matthew Champion*

Recent large scale surveys of medieval churches throughout England, albeit initially focussed upon East Anglia, have brought to light a mass of previously unrecorded graffiti inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> Although survey work continues, and is likely to do so for a number of years yet to come, the work already undertaken represents the first systematic and large scale survey of early graffiti inscriptions undertaken in the UK. Although previous surveys had been carried out, most notably that which formed the basis of Violet Pritchard's 1967 work, *English Medieval Graffiti*, these tended to focus upon a small number of site specific studies.<sup>2</sup> The new surveys, largely undertaken by volunteers, are enabling us to examine graffiti inscriptions within a far wider context, demonstrating just how widespread the phenomena once was and bringing together, for the first time, an almost entirely new corpus of medieval material.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the new surveys is the fact that the vast majority of these early graffiti inscriptions, where intelligible, have been shown to have distinctly spiritual or devotional aspects. Whilst the most obvious of these take the form of prayers or invocations, sometimes written in the conventional Latin forms of the orthodox Church, many others appear to have been created in non-traditional forms. Examples of ship graffiti clustered around altars and images dedicated to St Nicholas, patron saint of those in peril upon the sea, can reasonably be argued to be devotional or votive in nature, although the exact function may be open to interpretation and argument.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, examples of full length figures shown with hands raised in prayer clearly have religious associations, although the nature of that relationship may remain obscure. Indeed, unlike post-Reformation graffiti recorded in churches, which tends to be largely memorial in nature, the evidence on the walls would tend to suggest that the creation of pre-Reformation graffiti was largely a devotional activity, or at the very least an activity with strong devotional and religious overtones. It would appear difficult to argue that inscriptions shown of hands raised in the act of blessing, recorded at churches such as

Worlington in Suffolk and Ashwell in Hertfordshire, can have any interpretation other than a devotional one.<sup>4</sup> Whilst overtly devotional graffiti inscriptions have been identified in their thousands, there are many more inscriptions that would appear to have a spiritual meaning and function – and yet they appear to sit outside the orthodox tenets of the medieval church. These inscriptions, recorded in their thousands and, in some cases, with clear and distinct distribution patterns, would appear to be the physical manifestations of another level of beliefs amongst the populace at large. Given that they do appear to have a spiritual function and that they sit outside the more normally accepted sphere of religious belief and activity, these inscriptions can be regarded as falling into the generally unsatisfactorily termed category of ‘magic’.

Graffiti inscriptions have been recorded, although in far fewer numbers, that do follow the same patterns, and contain the same content, as those made familiar by Keith Thomas’ monumental study *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.<sup>5</sup> Inscribed curses recorded in Norwich cathedral from a late medieval context share striking similarities with curse tablets recovered from Roman contexts.<sup>6</sup> Geometric designs from churches such as Colkirk (Norfolk) and Worlington (Suffolk) appear identical to surviving drawn charms designed to act as a cure for the fistula.<sup>7</sup> Text inscriptions recorded at sites in Norfolk such as Ludham and Swannington appear to contain words and phrases observed in examples of written magical invocations, and numerous sites have been recorded as having examples of astrological symbols and concentric circles that may well have been related to the casting of horoscopes. Examples of medieval ‘magical symbols’, such as those listed in a manuscript formerly of Merton College Oxford (BL Royal 12 E xxv), Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* and *The Key of Solomon (Clavicula Salomonis)* are found on the walls of churches all across England; these symbols include amongst their number straightforward astrological motifs, symbols from the so called Malachim Text (most notably Samekh and Aleph) and corrupt versions of Hebrew characters purporting to be the symbols of particular angels.<sup>8</sup> However, these overtly magical examples represent a small percentage of the inscriptions recorded in English churches.

Whilst this chapter purports to deal with medieval apotropaic markings, the dating of much of the material can, at best, be described as problematic. Although all are inscribed into medieval fabric in churches, it is clear that this could have taken place at almost any point in the past, particularly as many of the ‘medieval’ markings clearly continue to be used in the post-medieval period. With dates not being commonly included in church graffiti inscriptions until the post-Reformation period, the dating of inscriptions is reliant upon a number of external factors. In the case of All Saints Church, Litcham, documentary evidence states that the nave was reconstructed in the early fifteenth century, being consecrated on

St Botolph's day in 1412, and we know that the church was first lime-washed in 1547.<sup>9</sup> Therefore the graffiti inscriptions emerging from beneath the layers of crumbling lime-wash must have been created between 1412 and 1547. Similarly the large scale architectural inscriptions recorded at Binham Priory, Norfolk, were found to be inscribed into twelfth-century fabric but partially obscured by a fourteenth-century paint scheme.<sup>10</sup> However, such precise documentary or physical evidence is unusual, and it is often only possible to offer a general date for individual inscriptions; text inscriptions can be dated by the style of lettering, ships by their construction and figures from their costume. In the case of more generalised symbols, into which category the apotropaic motifs must be regarded as falling, even such stylistic dating is impossible, leaving the inscriptions in a distinct chronological grey area.

It is also worthy of note that any discussion concerning the distribution patterns of markings found within individual buildings will, by necessity, be limited in scope. Whilst it has been possible to identify concentrations of markings within churches, it is always clear that these may be only incomplete distribution patterns, resulting from the numerous restorations and renovations that most medieval churches have been subject to, usually on more than one occasion. As a result it is impossible to know exactly how many inscriptions have been lost over the centuries. For example, today most graffiti inscriptions are recorded on the exposed stonework of piers, tower and chancel arches. Where early plaster surfaces are present, such as at Swannington in Norfolk, numerous examples are also to be found on the plaster as well. However, early plaster surfaces are a rarity, suggesting that we are, at best, only ever looking at incomplete distribution patterns which will, in turn, create a perhaps unnatural bias towards areas of exposed stonework.

A vast number of inscriptions recorded in the recent surveys are what have been termed 'apotropaic' symbols, or ritual protection marks – sometimes misleadingly referred to as 'Witch marks'. Accounting for as much of a quarter of the total number of recorded inscriptions, they are found inscribed into almost every type of fabric present in a medieval church, including stone, timber, lead and plaster. The same symbols are recorded in churches in East Anglia, Northumberland, Dorset; European studies suggest that they are actually to be found in almost every place that the medieval Christian church gained a foothold. Whilst church architectural styles might change between northern Spain and England, or Scandinavia and the Mediterranean, these symbols appear to be a constant, forming a pan-European graffiti phenomena. Indeed, studies of the graffiti inscriptions found in the timber stave churches of Norway could just as well be applied to the graffiti found in the great wool churches of East Anglia.<sup>11</sup> Despite this universality in terms of geographic spread the most notable feature of these symbols would appear to be the fact that, with one or two minor exceptions,

they almost entirely failed to cross the boundary into documentary history or more formal religious art. Whilst they may number in the tens of thousands, these inscribed symbols fail to appear in the written record. Nobody appears to have recorded the creation of these marks, or, perhaps more tellingly, written essays condemning their usage. Thus, although they may well have been a universal presence in the medieval church, they are a largely silent one.

This lack of supporting or interpretive evidence presents a number of challenges and quite fundamental questions with regard to these symbols. Most fundamental of all must be the question of their meaning and intended function. Are these symbols and inscriptions indeed apotropaic in nature? If they do have meaning beyond the act of creation and decoration, how can this be understood or divined without supporting documentary or physical evidence? Indeed, given the depth of study of medieval orthodox belief, and the arguably less well explored areas of medieval lay piety and 'folk' belief, where do these symbols fit within the wider pantheon of faith and belief? Are they indeed a physical manifestation of a belief in a 'magic' that sits outside formal religion, or are they part of a medieval belief system that accepted, encouraged and legitimised such activities? Whilst this chapter cannot hope to examine all the possible ritual protection markings and their intended meaning and function in any great depth (particularly in light of the extremely large volume of new material still being made available), it will attempt to offer an overview of the phenomena. At the same time it will examine a small number of apotropaic graffiti 'types' in further detail and attempt to place them within the wider context of medieval lay piety and folk belief. My only caveat, as Merrifield has said before me, is that 'a definitive work on the subject will remain impossible until much more evidence has been widely and systematically sought'.<sup>12</sup>

## **The markings**

There are at least five specific 'types' or designs of apotropaic marking that have been recorded in a medieval church context, with a number of other specific examples that have yet to be unquestionably classified. Whilst some are far more common than others, and the boundary between types is often far from distinct, all have been recorded in sufficient numbers to both recognise that they have a specific apotropaic function and to be able to identify at least general distribution patterns. The vast majority of these markings appear to follow the concept of the endless knot of line, based upon the widespread idea that evil forces, when encountering a line, will be compelled to follow it, or become hopelessly confused – thereby trapping themselves within the symbol.<sup>13</sup> A brief summary of the principal types of marks is as follows.

## Compass-drawn symbols

In churches containing graffiti inscriptions it is likely that one of the most obvious and easily recognised will be compass-drawn designs. In their simplest form, as a single circle inscribed in the stonework, woodwork, lead or wall plaster, they can be found scattered about the buildings with little recognisable pattern of distribution. However, the more complex compass-drawn designs, and particularly that known as the 'Daisy Wheel', are often found concentrated in certain areas – although the location of these concentrations can vary from church to church. These compass-drawn designs, perhaps as a result of their obvious and deliberate nature, have been the subject of much interest and debate with regard to their creation and intended function.

## VV Symbols

Whilst many of the seemingly apotropaic symbols recorded amongst collections of church graffiti may have an obscure relationship to the orthodox beliefs of the medieval church, others appear to stem from a recognisable and traceable source. One of the most common symbols discovered in medieval churches and in post-medieval vernacular buildings is the 'VV' symbol. Often shown inverted to resemble a capital 'M', or even upon its side, this particular symbol can be located on stonework, tombs, woodwork or plaster. In terms of quantity its appearance apparently outweighs the entire collection of other apotropaic symbols by a ratio of nearly two to one. However, despite this frequency it has been difficult to identify any particular or recognisable distribution patterns.

## 'Merels' type

The 'merels' type symbols are depicted as a series of squares or rectangles, invariably with lines running across from corner points towards the centre and are often confused with medieval board games such as nine-mans-morris or 'merels'. True gaming boards have been recorded at a number of sites, including York Minster and Lanercost Priory, and are invariably found on horizontal surfaces.<sup>14</sup> Whilst superficially similar to these gaming boards, many of the 'merels' symbols recorded in medieval churches are of a far simpler design, leading some individuals to suggest that they represent boards for 'three-mans-morris' or 'one-mans-morris'; these are most usually recorded on vertical surfaces.<sup>15</sup> Often they are found to be associated with other recognised apotropaic symbols and with a similar pattern of distribution, such as at Swannington (Norfolk) where several examples were recorded alongside a collection of compass-drawn designs. Continental studies strongly support the argument for their apotropaic function, based upon the concept of the endless line.<sup>16</sup>

## Swastika Pelta or Solomon's Knot

Despite Pritchard's statement that this design is to be 'found in many churches' the design is actually relatively rare, with the recent surveys having recorded only a handful of additional examples beyond the few dozen highlighted in her 1967 book.<sup>17</sup> The design appears to have much in common with the compass-drawn designs, including a number of aspects of its distribution, although this design appears far less frequently than the compass-drawn designs. In addition, it is also one of the few apotropaic symbols that appears to have made the transition, at least in the immediately post-conquest period, to more formal representations of orthodox religious art (see below).

## Pentangles

The five pointed star, or pentangle, is most certainly one of the less prolific ritual protection marks found in medieval churches. Whilst it is used as a common mason's mark these are usually easily to recognise and separate from the less formal instances.<sup>18</sup> Compared to the compass-drawn motifs the pentangle is relatively rare, appearing in only a few dozen or so English churches surveyed to date. However, it appears in sufficient quantities in diverse locations for it to be regarded as an apotropaic marking. More interestingly, a number of examples have been recorded in very specific locations, suggesting a distinct and identifiable function.

## Discussion

In order to examine the intended function and meaning of these symbols a more in-depth study of their origins and usage is required. However, for the purposes of this chapter it is sufficient to examine only two or three of the most common symbols in the expectation that casting light upon one 'type' may infer meaning to the rest. With compass-drawn designs being amongst the most common symbols recorded, and the most speculated upon, it would appear logical to concentrate upon this area.

At the present time there are still three distinct interpretations as to the meaning and function of the compass-drawn inscriptions recorded in English medieval churches – all of which are worth briefly repeating. These symbols first attracted serious attention in the opening years of the twentieth century from Cambridge-based architectural historian and antiquarian T. D. Atkinson. Atkinson had been drawn to these motifs through his work on consecration crosses within churches, an area of study that, at the time, he was almost alone in finding of interest.<sup>19</sup>

As Atkinson himself stated in the opening of his article on consecration crosses in the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 'all that we know

positively about consecration crosses may be told in very few words. That at the consecration of a church the bishop made with oil of chrism twelve crosses on the outside of the building... and twelve more crosses inside... it is required that the crosses shall be in circles'.<sup>20</sup> Atkinson went on to examine a number of examples of surviving consecration crosses in the churches of the Cambridge area. Alongside the more typical examples, Atkinson identified a number of other compass-drawn motifs, 'Daisy Wheels' in particular, that he thought were associated with the sites of consecration crosses, although Atkinson himself was not entirely convinced by the association. His principal site, Isleham old church, had been redundant for some years and had been used as an agricultural building, and Atkinson stated that he was 'inclined to think that three of these seven crosses are the forgeries of some young agriculturist'.<sup>21</sup> However, Atkinson's tentative association of the compass-drawn motifs with the site of consecration crosses has had a longevity that would perhaps have surprised him.

The second interpretation associated with the compass-drawn motifs recorded in churches has had a far wider base of support than Atkinson's theories, and it continues to be the view held by a number of academics down to the present day. The theory suggests that these compass-drawn designs were the work of masons and/or their apprentices, created during work on the buildings, and were a part of the geometric process involved in design and construction.<sup>22</sup> It is argued that these designs, particularly that known as the 'Daisy Wheel', were used by masons as teaching aids for their understudies, and that other compass-drawn designs may have been the result of masons testing the precision and sharpness of their dividers. Alternatively many of the more simple compass-drawn circles may have been the result of the masons creating a reference point that would enable them to calibrate their compasses quickly and without the need to keep referring back to a measure or ruler.

The basic premise, that these compass-drawn designs were created by masons for construction purposes, is most certainly attractive. The simple compass-drawn circle, and the subsequent Daisy Wheel, contain all the basic geometric information required to build everything from a simple pillar to a complete medieval church. It is the cornerstone for all aspects of Euclidian geometry. It is therefore quite understandable that such a symbol has been associated with medieval masons, and with their teaching of craft secrets to their apprentices, and understandable also that such a symbol, to anyone outside the Masonic circle, would consider its properties highly magical.

This association of compass-drawn designs with magical properties is the foundation for the third interpretation of their intended function. This interpretation has, until recently, found little general favour within the scholarly community – perhaps partly due to its association with areas of study such as folklore and folk magic that have been generally regarded as only marginally academic. However, such attitudes have changed and many

of these compass-drawn designs, it is argued, belong to the far wider group of inscribed markings that have been termed apotropaic.<sup>23</sup>

There is no simple explanation of the form and function of apotropaic markings. At their most basic level they could be seen as bringing luck and protecting individuals from evil or malign influence. Whilst their origins are unclear, with modern Wiccans arguing that the Daisy Wheel symbol is a continuation of an ancient sun symbol, what is clear is their popularity during the late medieval period. Their functions could be multiple and there is strong evidence that the beliefs associated with their creation and meaning could evolve through time. In a world where illness and unexpected ill fortune were seen as the physical manifestations of invisible evil forces acting upon both the world and those who inhabited it, these markings represented a very real and physical counter measure that augmented, rather than replaced, the spiritual protections of prayer and the church. The compass-drawn designs were certainly amongst the most prolific of the symbols utilised, with many thousands of examples now having been recorded in English churches; these, it may be assumed, were regarded as being effective.

The simple answer is that all three interpretations are, at one and the same time, both correct and incorrect. In short, there appears to be no one answer that can satisfactorily account for all the compass-drawn motifs recorded in English medieval churches. Atkinson's idea, that they are related to the sites of consecration crosses, and may indeed represent consecration crosses, does indeed have merit. Consecration crosses were most certainly often created with compasses, and numerous examples still show the scribed marks of the compass across their surface. Indeed, at sites such as Great Walsingham (Norfolk) it is possible to identify that the surviving consecration cross in the north aisle actually replaced an earlier cross, which survives only as an off-set series of scribed arcs beneath the present pigment. At other sites such as Colton (Norfolk) the flaking away of medieval pigment has revealed all the compass-drawn lines, and setting out lines, used to create the consecration cross that survives in the nave. However, many churches now contain no surviving medieval pigment and the exact location of any consecration crosses is unknown. In a few cases it is possible to suggest that the elaborate compass-drawn motifs that do survive may well represent the original setting out lines for painted crosses that no longer exist – particularly if they were created on a relatively large scale.

The church at Troston (Suffolk) still contains the remnants of two painted consecration crosses in the nave. In addition the church also contains an unusually high concentration of early graffiti inscriptions, particularly concentrated on the tower arch and chancel arch.<sup>24</sup> Amongst these are two identical and very elaborate compass-drawn designs that are located exactly opposite each other, at the same height, on either side of the tower arch – a location often associated with the site of consecration crosses. Similarly, a

large and elaborate compass-drawn design is to be found in exactly the same location, just to the side of the tower arch, at Sedgeford church (Norfolk) and another large and elaborate design, most probably originally one of a pair, is to be found at Ludham in the Norfolk Broads. However, whilst there are a handful of recorded examples that might be associated with the sites of consecration crosses they are simply that; a small number amongst thousands.

There are also a number of compass-drawn designs that *were* undoubtedly created by masons or their apprentices. An elaborate spiral design recorded in Bedingham church (Norfolk) is likely to have been the work of a mason, and large scale compass-drawn designs have been recorded as part of wider architectural inscriptions at sites such as Binham Priory (Norfolk), Weston Longville (Norfolk), Marsham (Norfolk) and Ely Cathedral (Cams).<sup>25</sup> At Belaugh church (Norfolk) the piers of the north aisle are covered in a mass of compass-drawn designs, many of which appear to be constructional in nature and may well relate to the design of the upper section of the fifteenth-century rood screen. However, as with Atkinson's theory, the designs that can be directly attributed to the work of masons are still very few. In addition there are also a number of other problems associated with this interpretation. In the first instance the vast majority of compass-drawn designs are simply too small to have been created by mason's dividers – which the archaeological record also demonstrates were relatively rare tools.<sup>26</sup> In addition there are a number of other symbols used by masons to teach the basics of geometry, several of which appear in manuscript form, and yet none of these designs are found etched into the walls of our medieval churches.<sup>27</sup>

What is clear is that the vast majority of compass-drawn designs recorded in English medieval churches simply do not fit into the first two interpretations. The fact that many of them are recorded clearly associated with other recognised devotional inscriptions, such as that found with the Trinity symbol at Edgefield in Norfolk, or with a Latin prayer at Ashwell in Hertfordshire, strongly support the idea that these compass-drawn designs were intended to function as ritual protection markings.<sup>28</sup>

The origins of the compass-drawn circle as an apotropaic symbol are unclear. It may well have its origins in Roman architectural decoration, with compass-drawn designs featuring as common window head decorations at a number of surviving British sites such as Housesteads fort on Hadrian's Wall, but it is unclear how this may relate to the designs found within medieval churches. What is clear is that by the late eleventh century, compass-drawn designs had begun to be a regular feature of church decoration and most particularly associated with fonts and the right of baptism.

The link between these apotropaic symbols, most particularly the compass-drawn designs and *swastike pelta*, and baptism is well attested to as far back as at least the eleventh century. Although the survival of early fonts is a rarity, a high percentage of those that do date back to the eleventh and

twelfth centuries contain these symbols as part of their formal decorative schemes. In the far west of England a whole series of early fonts, including those found at Buckland-in-the-Moor (Devon), Altarnum (Cornwall) and Combe-in-Teignhead (Devon), all contain compass-drawn designs, more specifically that known as the Daisy Wheel, as the principle decorative motif.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in West Norfolk a group of four or five eleventh-century fonts, perhaps all by the same craftsman or workshop, all contain prominent examples of these motifs.<sup>30</sup> The two finest examples from the Norfolk group, from Toftrees and Sculthorpe, both contain very prominent examples of both the Daisy Wheel and the pelta motifs as their main decoration. Other examples of these symbols are to be found at St Andrew's church, Bredwardine (Herefordshire) and at Egleton in Rutland, where the Daisy Wheel design features on both the early font and on the two surviving eleventh century tympanum.

The association of compass-drawn apotropaic motifs with fonts would suggest an assumed need for protection for the newborn child from malign influences, and displays an understandable logic that is often far from clear in many of the other areas in which they are recorded. However, whilst the formalised decoration of the fonts is only indirectly linked to the phenomena of graffiti inscriptions, a number of East Anglian churches have shown distribution patterns of compass-drawn imagery that may well suggest a continued association with the church font and areas immediately surrounding the fonts. Swannington church (Norfolk) contains a very large collection of early graffiti inscriptions spread throughout the entire church and includes a large number of complex compass-drawn designs. However, all the compass-drawn designs, almost without exception, are located between the first two piers of the north arcade – the probable original location of the church font. Similarly, at St Andrew's church, Bedingham (Norfolk), the compass-drawn motifs are located on the most easterly pier of the south arcade, facing the side altar in an area once used as a separate chapel, and between the two most westerly piers of the north arcade – again the likely original position of the font. Similar patterns of distribution have been recognised in other East Anglian churches, most notably at sites such as Lidgate in Suffolk. Whilst Mary Webb has researched in detail the orthodox and documentary background to these symbols on early fonts, describing them as 'a commonly recognisable statement of the Macrocosmic Harmony within Gods Work of Foundation', it is difficult to believe that such a depth of theological knowledge was behind the actions of those who created the graffiti inscriptions of these symbols in the areas surrounding fonts, particularly after several centuries had passed.<sup>31</sup> More likely perhaps is the idea that these symbols continued to be associated with fonts and the right of baptism amongst the lay congregation, albeit as a fossilised 'folk' belief, long after many of these early fonts had been replaced with more modern examples.

The apparent link at certain sites between the area containing the font and the geographical distribution of the compass-drawn designs is an intriguing one that raises a number of issues. With baptism regarded as one of the key seven sacraments of the church, its importance within the lay community would have appeared, in a number of churches at least, to have engendered an additional ritualised level of lay piety centred around the role of protection. In addition, the link between the location of these compass-drawn designs and baptism may well suggest clear gender bias in their creation. The general female association with the act of childbirth and subsequent baptism leads to the intriguing possibility that these designs around the font may have been created by women. Although such speculation has no direct evidence to support it, there is one intriguing piece of circumstantial evidence that might lend it a level of credibility.

One of the fundamental problems associated with the origin of compass-drawn designs in churches remains the question as to what tool was actually used to create the inscriptions. As noted previously, the compass itself is a relatively rare tool in the archaeological record. Dividers were used primarily by stone-masons, in a larger format, and by woodworkers. Indeed, the dividers, along with the set square, actually came to be seen as the symbolic tools of the masons and appear to have functioned much like a badge of office.<sup>32</sup> In manuscript illustrations of construction works, particularly numerous in the cases of churches and cathedrals, the master mason can invariably be identified by the fact that he is normally shown with a large pair of dividers and/or a set square. The same symbols appear in both stone carved effigies of known masons or on memorial brasses. However, the dividers that these masons are associated with are invariably of a large scale. Although these large dividers were responsible for many of the large-scale architectural designs found in churches such as Binham Priory, Norfolk, and the tracing floors of York Minster and Wells Cathedral, they can hardly have been used to create the vast majority of compass-drawn designs recorded in churches today, which are typically in the region of 50mm–120mm in diameter.<sup>33</sup>

These dimensions are far more in line with the type of dividers that would have been available to woodworkers, which makes the links between the motifs inscribed into the church stonework and the mason's themselves appear even weaker. Similarly, the fact that the same markings also appear on church woodwork, such as the ends of pews, rood screens and church doors, also raises the question of why masons would be practicing their craft on a material that was clearly not their own domain? The same question can be applied conversely to the woodworkers. Given these ambiguities, it would therefore appear difficult to ascribe the creation of these designs specifically to either trade group.

This then leaves us with the question, if such tools are relatively uncommon, how can they be regarded as having been used to create the many thousands of compass-drawn designs recorded in churches today?

Given that these thousands of compass-drawn designs have been recorded in only a few hundred churches, and that further survey work will unquestionably add considerable numbers of examples to the record, are we then to accept that potentially tens of thousands of examples were created by a tool that was not available to the vast majority of the population? Both logic and the archaeological record would suggest not. Therefore, the tool that created the majority of these small scale compass-drawn designs would most likely have been far more common than the archaeological record suggests that compasses and dividers ever were. However, there is one particular tool that appears in significant numbers in the archaeological record, and in the visual and documentary evidence, that would have been widely available to large numbers of individuals – and had a particular association with women.

Small metal shears, used for everything from sheep shearing to hair-dressing, from embroidery to herb cutting, are common finds in the archaeological record.<sup>34</sup> Made from a single piece of iron, they are forged into a 'U' shape with a blade at either extremity, and were used by simply applying pressure to each side to close the gap between the blades. Effective, cheap and easy to use, these shears functioned much as the more technically challenging scissors do today. Although made in a wide variety of sizes, as dictated by their function, the majority of those recovered in the UK are of small scale and appear intended for domestic or personal use. These small shears often appear in medieval manuscripts as being either used by women, or hanging from their waist belts in association with purses or chatelaines. A small number of other illustrations also show them being present within the medieval household and one particular illustration actually shows a pair hung up by a fireplace – an intriguing location given the number of compass-drawn designs recorded on medieval and post-medieval chimney beams.<sup>35</sup> In terms of size, the shears would also appear to be likely candidates for the creation of many of the small compass-drawn designs so far recorded. Experiments have shown that their sturdy construction and fixed dimensions actually make them a rather easier tool to use in the creation of such designs than a pair of dividers, where the width of the arms must be constantly checked and rechecked to ensure accuracy.

If it is the case that many of these small compass-drawn designs were not in fact created using either compasses or dividers, but were in fact made using small domestic shears, then the ambiguities related to the idea that they were created by masons or woodworkers can be laid aside. With such shears being common household utensils then the tools could potentially have been available to all levels of society regardless of their trade. In addition, the idea that many of these designs were created by women, particularly those associated with concentrations around the baptismal font, may have added weight, given the evidential association between these particular tool

and females in the documentary sources. Whilst it is not possible to suggest that even the majority of these compass-drawn designs were created in close association with the font, and many others are recorded in areas that clearly have no baptismal association, the recognition of such concentrations at even a handful of sites clearly reinforces the idea of a strong apotropaic function associated with these symbols.

The clear association of these symbols with an apotropaic function is further reinforced by a close examination of the pentangle and its use within the medieval church. The pentangle is an ancient symbol whose use has been recorded as far back 3000 BC where it formed part of the ancient Sumerian pictogram language. To the Greeks it was regarded as a symbol of mathematical purity or perfection, similar to the geometric perfection of the Daisy Wheel.<sup>36</sup> Since the Reformation, the symbol has become especially associated with the magical arts and, in more recent centuries, with Wiccan practices and Victorian concepts of 'black' magic.<sup>37</sup> However, during the Middle Ages it is clear that this symbol was regarded as a specifically Christian symbol with no 'evil' connotations and, more specifically, was seen as a symbol of protection. Intriguingly, it is also one of the very few ritual protection marks for which we have any documentary evidence to support this supposed function.

In the late fourteenth century an unknown poet, most probably from north western England, wrote the middle-English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The single manuscript, now in the British Library, contains the earliest known rendering of the now famous tale and it is unclear as to exactly how well known the story was amongst his contemporaries.<sup>38</sup> The story is one of a whole tradition of quest cycles that promote the concepts of chivalry, loyalty and courage. Gawain emerges from the tale as a flawed hero, but a hero who, in recognising those flaws within himself, is seen as a model for the chivalric Christian warrior.

In the original manuscript the unknown author goes into some detail concerning the fitting out of Sir Gawain prior to his embarking upon his quest. His tunic, arms and armour are described in turn before finally he is handed his shield. Upon the 'shining scarlet' shield is painted a pentangle in 'pure gold'. The author then states that 'why the pentangle was appropriate to that prince I intend to say, though it will stall our story'.<sup>39</sup> He then launches into a lengthy digression, one of the only ones in the poem, in which the author details the symbolism of the pentangle. It is, he states, the symbol of Solomon that 'is taken to this day as a token of fidelity' and is known in England as the 'endless knot'. He then goes on to detail the five times five ways in which the symbol will protect and inspire the knight. It is a symbol of the five wounds that Christ suffered upon the cross, of his five faultless fingers, of the five senses, of the five joys of the Virgin Mary in her son and lastly of the five virtues of knighthood – the 'pure pentangle as people have called it'.<sup>40</sup>

It is the purity of the symbol itself, echoing the Greek idea of geometric perfection, that gave it power within the medieval mind. To the Gawain author it was 'a five-pointed form which never failed, never stronger to one side or slack at the other, but unbroken in its being from beginning to end'.<sup>41</sup> This pure, unailing and unbroken symbol also had one other particular and widely recognised power – to offer protection from demons. As the Gawain author highlights, the pentangle was regarded as the symbol of Solomon. According to Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition, the symbol of Solomon was found inscribed in a ring that was delivered to the great king by angels.<sup>42</sup> The ring gave its bearer many powers, including the ability to talk to animals, and very specifically gave Solomon power over demons. Solomon used the ring as a signet, signing documents and decrees, and the symbol, with numerous variations, became known as the 'Seal of Solomon'. Although more usually regarded as being the six pointed star, known today as the Star of David, many early traditions have the pentangle and Star of David as being interchangeable, as is clearly the case with the Gawain author.

The pentangle on the shield of Sir Gawain can therefore be viewed in a number of different lights. Although it represents all the overtly Christian religious and knightly virtues that the unknown author ascribed to it, it would also have been seen by most of the original fourteenth-century readers of the poem as a potent protection from demons. Its location upon both Gawain's shield and mantle is particularly significant. The physical protection of the knight's shield was being augmented, perhaps even enhanced, by the addition of the pentangle. Whilst the shield itself offered protection from the dangers of the physical world the symbol emblazoned upon it in 'pure gold' offered protection from the dangers of the spiritual or supernatural worlds. This concept of the pentangle being regarded as a powerful symbol of protection, particularly with regard to demons, appears clear in several examples of medieval church graffiti. However, whilst the protective function of the symbol appears straightforward, the uses to which it is put in a number of graffiti examples suggest that the form of protection could be subtly altered to fit specific circumstances.

The east side of the chancel arch at Troston St Mary, Suffolk, is covered in a large amount of graffiti inscriptions. The lower areas of the stonework have been so covered with inscriptions as to make many of them now impossible to decipher amidst the jumble of symbols and lettering. The text that can be read, and many of the symbols and images, clearly suggest that the vast majority of the graffiti dates to the late Middle Ages. On the south side of the arch, in an area just above the crowded and jumbled mass of graffiti, sits a single and distinct inscription of a demon's head. The head is shown in profile, with its mouth gaping showing a row of sharp pointed teeth. The imagery of the demon's head is very similar to that shown on the Wenhaston Doom (Suffolk) and a painted graffito from the rood stair turret at St Edmund's church, Acle (Norfolk). It is tempting to suggest that the Troston demon may well have been modelled upon a once extant demon

painted on the other face of the arch as part of the now very fragmented Doom.<sup>43</sup>

Across the surface of the Troston demon, etched far more deeply into the stonework than the demon's head itself, is a large pentangle. The pentangle sits precisely on top of the head, with each of its points reaching the edge of the image but proceeding no further. Although not obscuring the image, the pentangle is very clearly related to the shape of the head itself. The depth of the inscription points to it having been over-scored time and time again, suggesting that it was important that the symbol be clearly visible. At the other end of the church, inscribed into the tower arch, is one of the few graffiti inscriptions from the late Middle Ages that clearly depicts a woman. The full length figure shows a woman in profile with a long low-waisted gown, an elaborate head-dress and hands raised in prayer. Clearly depicted in an act of devotion, the figure is accompanied by another deeply cut example of a pentangle. However, unlike the example from the chancel arch, this pentangle is not crossing the figure itself and sits just to one side of the image.

This pattern of pentangles crossing demonic figures, but lying alongside more human figures, is repeated in several other churches. In Surrey, the church of St Mary at Horne has an example of a small demonic head complete with horns that is overlaid with a deeply etched six pointed star. At Swannington (Norfolk) a number of stylised human heads are etched into the pillars of the north arcade, with pentangles lying alongside them.

Accepting that the five and six pointed star, or Seal of Solomon, was regarded as a symbol of protection during the later Middle Ages, with particular power to protect from the malign influence of demons, then it is possible to attribute tentative function to the recorded graffiti inscriptions. It appears clear that, where a graffito depicts a demon itself, as at Horne or Troston, the star is placed directly on top of the image. This ritual placement can be interpreted as overlaying the sign of protection across the threat itself, thereby neutralising that same threat. The demon is literally pinned to the stonework beneath a never ending line from which it cannot escape. The depth of the incised lines of the pentangle at Troston suggests a repeated scoring of the mark, perhaps ensuring the continued imprisonment of the malign force or reinforcing the protection from evil. In contrast, where the pentangle is placed next to a human figure the symbol functions as a plea, asking 'for protection' for that individual from the malign influence of demons. Whilst such distribution patterns certainly don't appear associated with all recorded examples of the pentangle, or even all images of demons, the fact that it is found at diverse sites across England suggests that the belief was both widespread and widely understood.

Similarly the 'VV' symbol is another motif whose apotropaic function is supported by external evidence. The symbol has been traditionally associated with the cult of the Virgin Mary, and the 'VV' has been suggested as being the initial letters of the term 'Virgo Virginum' (Virgin of Virgins).<sup>44</sup>

Whilst this may very well be the case with the obviously medieval examples, the symbol clearly continues to be used well into the eighteenth century, if not the nineteenth century – making it likely that, although a ‘traditional’ marking, its meaning may well have changed or evolved over time. Indeed, it would most certainly be difficult to argue that an individual creating such a symbol in a domestic setting in the late eighteenth century, in an environment entirely divorced from the belief system of the pre-Reformation church by several centuries, was creating it with the same intended function as an individual inscribing it into a church pillar in the fifteenth century.

Given the supposed association with the Virgin, it has been suggested that the symbol is more likely to be recorded in areas of the church associated with Marian imagery.<sup>45</sup> Although several churches have been highlighted as evidencing such a distribution pattern, they are in the minority. Generally, the symbol would appear to be fairly indiscriminate in terms of its location. It is as likely to be recorded on the back of rood screens, or pews, as it is to be found near any area that might have, or once have had, Marian associations. In terms of general distribution patterns, the symbol is often found in small groups, clustered on individual piers or even particular faces of piers. At Ashwell church (Herts) a mass of such inscriptions is to be found located on the north side of the entrance to the tower, whilst at Lidgate (Suffolk) the same symbol is again repeated around the font. At Clare church (Suffolk) the symbol is to be found on the piers at the eastern end of the south arcade, whilst at Sedgeford (Norfolk) it appears in quantity on both sides of the tower arch. Similar concentrations are to be found in many hundreds of English churches.

It is also one of the few ritual protection marks that made the occasional cross-over into more orthodox church art, where a Marian association may also be occasionally implied. The west door of Fakenham church (Norfolk) contains a flint flushwork shield in each of the spandrels. One is a monogram of the name ‘MARIA’, being a reference to the Virgin Mary, whilst the other contains the enigmatic VV symbol. Its location in North Norfolk may suggest that the VV can also be interpreted as a ‘W’, standing for the major pilgrimage centre of Walsingham which lies only a few miles to the north, again suggesting a possible Marian connection. What is clear is that the symbol appears on all types of fabric found within churches and over an extended, albeit debateable, time period. For countless generations of the congregation of these churches the symbol was regarded as having a meaningful, if not ‘magical’, function.

## **Conclusions**

The most fundamental discovery of the church graffiti surveys undertaken in East Anglia and elsewhere in recent years is the sheer quantity of new material being recorded. Prior to the beginning of the recent surveys it

was widely believed that surviving early graffiti in churches were a relative rarity. This has proved not to be the case. Of the inscriptions recorded to date, by far the largest single category is that which has become known as ritual protection marks. Indeed, if a church is found to contain early inscriptions then it is a great rarity for these particular markings *not* to be present. In many churches, such as Litcham, Blakeney, Cley, Wiveton, Ludham, Troston, North Elmham, Sedgeford, Swannington and Brisley, several dozen individual markings can be found within the same structure. These findings have been supported by the discoveries of other county based surveys such as Surrey, Suffolk, Essex, Kent and Lincolnshire.

The surveys have demonstrated that these marks were common across a wide geographical area. In addition, the sheer quantity of material recorded has also suggested that a number of overlooked markings, previously only recorded at a few specific churches, actually enjoy a far wider distribution. Often found in conjunction with recognised ritual protection marks, these too may have been intended to function as apotropaic marks in their own right. The most obvious of these symbols is the 'Ragged Staff', most usually regarded as being heraldic in nature and associated with the Earls of Warwick. However, as Violet Pritchard noted back in 1967, the symbol turns up far too often in a church context, often in clusters or groups like other recognised apotropaic symbols, making it highly likely that it had a devotional association.<sup>46</sup> Over half a dozen specific and distinct types of ritual protection mark, with many dozen variations upon each theme, have now been clearly identified and recorded, with examples of certain types, such as compass-drawn designs or 'VV' symbols, numbering into the thousands. Whilst it has been possible to identify new markings, and greatly extend the corpus of previously recorded markings, their exact function and relationship with the medieval church in which they were created appears complex.

Many of the recorded symbols and inscriptions most certainly sit outside the traditional doctrine and teachings of the medieval church. Their specific use and function is not attested to in any known religious treatise or manuscript. Indeed, given their widespread distribution, the complete lack of textual references to them in England is perhaps one of their most intriguing aspects. They appear in no prayer books, in no theological treatises and in no official records of the church. They do not appear in manuscript studies, stained glass or wall paintings. Mellinkoff's monumental study of medieval protection symbols makes no mention of them.<sup>47</sup> In official terms, and in direct contrast to the material evidence, they simply do not exist.

Only in one or two specific cases, such as that of the 'VV' markings or a small number of compass-drawn designs, do we find these markings crossing boundaries into the more formal lexicon of church architecture. Such instances are very rare, such as the compass-drawn motifs recorded on early fonts, and further highlight this lack of migration between the formal and the informal. And yet their use and function was so widespread,

so accepted and fundamentally understood at a parish level, that they are found inscribed into the very fabric of many thousands of buildings across most of Europe. Whilst these symbols and inscriptions clearly sit outside the traditional and orthodox teaching and practises of the late medieval church, is it truly correct to consider them as being separate from those teachings? The evidence suggests that it is not.

Whilst the term 'magic' is clearly a matter of interpretation, definition and circumstance, these inscriptions may well be termed magical, at least in the minds of those who created them. However, such a definition need not place their use or function beyond the pale of orthodox late medieval religion. The two areas were not mutually exclusive. Examples of written charms and curses that survive from the late medieval period, where 'magical' and non-orthodox outcomes are anticipated by the use of language and imagery that is very clearly drawing upon the rituals of the church itself, suggest that in the minds of the medieval congregation at least, these boundaries were both fluid and permeable.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the presence of graffiti inscriptions in churches that both echo and parallel those charms and ritualised curses, which are more normally preserved on parchment, albeit in limited numbers, suggest that such boundaries may well have been nonexistent to many of the individuals who created them. Commenting upon the writings of Venancius of Moerbeke concerning divination, historian Richard Kieckhefer states that 'to view divination in these terms is to take it clearly outside the realm of magic and place it within the sphere of religion'.<sup>49</sup> In the case of the ritual protection markings discovered in medieval churches it is probable that such spheres exist largely in the minds of the modern scholars that study them. As Eamon Duffy has strongly argued, these practices were strongly Christian and, to all intents and purposes, can be regarded as belonging to the mainstream rather than the fringes of orthodox belief.<sup>50</sup>

Whilst these inscriptions may be specific reflections of aspects of lay piety and folk belief, they were, in the eyes of their creators, a fundamental facet of everyday parochial religion. Indeed, it can be argued that their very presence within the church structure was a seeking of legitimisation for their creation. Additionally, the ritual inscribing of the fabric of the church building may have had a secondary aspect beyond pure legitimisation. All other interactions with the church were of a purely temporary nature and, as such, it may be argued that their value was lessened as a result. Donations and bequests left to the church to undertake masses and commemorations were undoubtedly considered effective ways of reducing time spent in purgatory and seeking God's favour, but they were still largely transient. Once the Mass had been sung, the Month's mind and Year's mind elapsed, and the votive candles reduced to burnt stubs upon the altars, what was left? Unarguably such rituals carried a weight of belief but, on a purely pragmatic level, it was also a proven tenet of the church that permanent memorials carried even more weight. Here then is perhaps one other

aspect of the creation of these ritual markings that must be considered. By being inscribed into the very fabric of the church building they achieved a permanence that went beyond that of traditional prayer. When the echoes of the mass had faded and the pools of candle-wax had been scoured from the altar, these inscriptions would remain. Their function would continue. Indeed, the very permanent nature of these inscriptions may well have been regarded as adding to their very potency. Their ability to achieve the objective for which they were created, their power or 'magic', may well have been enhanced.

A purely 'magical' action may rely upon process and formula in the hope or expectation of a desired outcome, yet the creation of these symbols within the church itself is clearly meant to be a fundamentally important aspect of their creation. Their presence within the structure was because the church itself, as both a building and an institution, was an important aspect in their creation and intended function; as can be argued, this simply wasn't the case for the more familiar charms and curses that found their way onto vellum and paper. To those who created them, these inscriptions may well have been regarded as magical, but in no different a manner than transubstantiation, the miraculous transformation of the bread and wine into the blood and body of Christ, may have appeared as magical to the untutored laity who partook in the Mass.

The archaeological evidence suggests that many of these inscriptions were visibly present within medieval parish churches for several centuries.<sup>51</sup> It is also clear that, far from being hidden away in dark corners, these inscriptions would have been one of the first things noticed by visitors to the medieval parish church. Although difficult to see today without the aid of specialist lighting, this simply wouldn't have been the case during the middle ages. Unlike today's white-washed walls, the medieval church would have been a veritable riot of colour. Wall paintings of saints, angels and the story of Christ were found high on the walls of almost every parish church. In many cases archaeological investigation has shown that the lower areas of the church walls were also adorned with pigment.<sup>52</sup> In these areas, normally devoid of formal paint schemes due to the ever present threat of damage from the inevitable damp, a plain pigment appears to have been more often applied. At Weston Longville (Norfolk) the delamination of pigment layers in the lower parts of the walls indicates that they were, at various times in the past, painted red, black or yellow – until finally white-washed over at the Reformation. It is also clear that many of these inscriptions and ritual markings were etched through this pigment to reveal the pale stone beneath. In the case of Blakeney church we know that the piers of the arcade were painted a deep red ochre and that the many dozens of examples of ship graffiti for which the church is well known were actually scratched through this layer of pigment.<sup>53</sup> As a result, visitors to the church in the late fifteenth century would have seen an entire fleet of small white ships sailing across

a deep red ocean. Despite being so visible to the casual observer, and being present in the church for several hundred years prior to the Reformation, these inscriptions intriguingly suffer no defacement. Indeed, many later inscriptions clearly respect the space of those that have been previously created, suggesting an accepted deference and understanding of their function that discouraged subsequent disfigurement, in many cases, for several hundred years. The clear inference is that these inscriptions were both an accepted and acceptable aspect of parochial worship and lay piety. In essence, whilst their intended function may be considered 'magical' it was only as a popular extension of the magic of the late medieval church.

It is clear, however, that the intended function of many of these ritual markings was far from simplistic. They represent a complex and sophisticated series of beliefs and intended outcomes that go far beyond simply warding off evil or seeking better fortune. Symbols such as the pentangle can be recognised as having a shifting function and meaning that was closely linked to its location and proximity and relationship to other inscriptions. Whilst some markings, such as ship graffiti, might simply cluster around an area deemed to have spiritual significance, other markings such as crosses and ritual circles might derive enhanced potency from their association with doorways, fonts and thresholds. In the same vein, whilst most churches demonstrate a clear concentration in the more public areas of the nave and porch, other churches, such as Troston, follow an exactly opposite pattern, with the most significant ritual markings being located in the chancel. With several distinct patterns of distribution and function now identifiable within East Anglian churches, albeit with the usual caveats, it is clear that these ritual markings belong to a widespread and coherent system of belief that permeated many levels of medieval society over a geographically wide area. However, any attempt to define exactly what those beliefs were is fraught with difficulties.

Until very recently much of the academic investigation into the function and meaning of these ritual marks has concentrated upon post-medieval vernacular buildings.<sup>54</sup> The ground-breaking work of Timothy Easton has examined numerous sites and been able to establish strong theories as to the form and function of the ritual markings and the beliefs that underpinned their creation. However, many of the conclusions reached by Easton are difficult to apply directly to the examples recorded in medieval churches. What does appear to be clear is that, whilst many of the ritual markings may physically appear exactly the same as their post-medieval counterparts, the intended and specific function may well be different. Given the landslide changes in religious practice well documented throughout the period, such an evolution and specialisation of function is by no means unlikely. That particular trade groups, such as builders, should continue an age-old practise associated with their craft, and even channel it into a particular belief of intended function is strongly supported by the evidence. In short,

the act itself may remain the same but the intended function may have evolved and changed with the passing decades and centuries. At one and the same time these practices, once fundamentally linked to the church, found themselves drifting towards the fringes. The earlier ritual markings in medieval churches can therefore be considered part of a 'magic' that grew out of the formal and orthodox beliefs of the medieval church. Many of the post-medieval examples found in vernacular settings, particularly those from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are both chronologically and spiritually divorced from these origins. However, rather than reflecting simple fossilised beliefs of the pre-Reformation church amongst the laity they suggest a continually evolving system of folk belief. Such beliefs could not draw upon any aspects of formal contemporary religious practise for legitimisation and must be regarded as far closer to modern concepts of 'magic' than the highly ritualised protection markings from which they evolved.

The evidence from churches therefore suggests that these ritual protection markings were both an accepted and acceptable form of lay piety, and that they functioned on the fringes of orthodox religion. Their specific functions, though difficult to individually assign, were understood by medieval congregations across Europe. In contrast, for the non-Latin-speaking laity many of the services of the church were understandable only in terms of interpretation. Whilst being familiar with the individual rituals of each service, it is arguable that they would not have understood either the language or much of the symbolism. They relied upon foreknowledge and instruction to give these ceremonies true meaning. In many fundamental respects these ritual markings can be considered more accessible forms of worship and ritual devotion. They were most certainly more personal.

The late medieval church may have had a millennium to formulate and establish its theology and doctrine, but on a physical level this period saw a number of significant changes; changes that are still reflected in the surviving material culture of many East Anglian parish churches today. The most obvious difference in the interior of the late fifteenth-century church to that of two centuries earlier was the enclosure and compartmentalisation of the physical space. In the late thirteenth century the interior of the English parish church was a relatively Spartan environment. Whilst the walls may have been richly coloured with pigment and hangings, and the floor laid with pavements or encaustic tiles, the actual space itself was uncluttered. Benches, if present, were most usually lined against the walls, leaving a large open area within the nave, and the separation of nave from chancel was more symbolic than physical. Whilst an elaborate font might be located in the nave, its splendid isolation would in itself emphasise its role and significance within the parish space.

By the late fifteenth century, this open and unconstrained idea of the church interior was fast becoming a thing of the past. The whole of the

church interior, but most particularly the nave, was being transformed into a far more rigid and formalised parish space. Here social standing, hierarchy and status found physical manifestation in the elaborately carved pews and benches paid for and installed by the parishioners. Likewise, the spiritual and legal differences readily recognised between nave and chancel were physically reinforced by the insertion of increasingly elaborate and highly decorative rood screens.<sup>55</sup> The result may well have been an increase in the visual representations of piety for the congregation as the whole, but for the individual these changes imposed a physical distancing from the spiritual centres of the priesthood and chancel.

In direct contrast to these trends of separation, formalisation and compartmentalisation of the late medieval parish church, these ritual marks could act as a direct link between the individual and their God. They allowed a personal interaction between individual members of the congregation and their church, as both building and institution. Furthermore, this was an interaction that, in contrast to almost every other interaction between the individual and the church, was made all the more potent by the fact that it did not require the intercession of priest, bishop or Pope. Baptism, confession, marriage, burial and, above all, the Mass were interactions that were given their very value by the intercession of the clergy on the individual's behalf. Only in private prayer was an individual in direct communion with God. These symbols and ritual markings, whether drawing upon inner spiritual belief or the 'magic' of the late medieval church, were simply prayers made solid in stone.

## Notes

1. The large scale surveys began in 2010 with the establishment of the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey. At the present time the surveys have expanded to cover the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, Lincolnshire, Surrey, East Sussex and Kent. See *Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey*, at: [www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk](http://www.medieval-graffiti.co.uk); and *Suffolk Medieval Graffiti Survey*, at: [www.medieval-graffiti-suffolk.co.uk](http://www.medieval-graffiti-suffolk.co.uk).
2. Violet Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti* (Cambridge, 1967).
3. John Peake, 'Graffiti and Devotion in Three Maritime Churches', in Heslop, T. A., Mellings, E., Thofner, M., (eds), *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: from Prehistory to the Present* (Woodbridge, 2012), 148–162.
4. The hand raised in blessing also appears in the mid-fourteenth-century wall painting of St Edmund at Lakenheath, Suffolk, only a few miles from Worlington, suggesting that it was regarded as a commonly recognised symbol of devotion. Matthew Champion, 'Devotion, Pestilence and Conflict: the Medieval Wall Paintings of St Mary the Virgin, Lakenheath', in Heslop, T. A., Mellings, E., Thofner, M., (eds), *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: from Prehistory to the Present* (Woodbridge, 2012).
5. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971).
6. Matthew Champion, 'Ill Feeling on the Walls: Late Medieval Graffiti Curses from Norwich Cathedral', *Norfolk Archaeology*, (forthcoming).

7. An example of a lamina for a fistula can be found in the fifteenth-century manuscript Add. MS 15236, f.31v.
8. Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584)*, Introduction by the Rev. Montague Summers, Dover Edition (New York, 1972), 231; Samuel Liddell Macgregor Mathers, *The Key of Solomon the King* (London, 1889), plate 13; examples of the so called Malachim Text can be found in Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, Llewellyn Edition (Woodbury, 1993), 560.
9. Matthew Champion, 'Medieval Graffiti Inscriptions Found in All Saints Church, Litcham', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 46(2011), 199–208.
10. Matthew Champion, 'Tracery Designs at Binham Priory', *English Heritage Historical Review*, 6 (2011), 6–21.
11. Martin Blindheim, *Graffiti in Norwegian Stave Churches: 1150–1350* (Oslo, 1985).
12. Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London, 1987), xiv.
13. Ruth Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons: The Protective Power of Medieval Visual Motifs and Themes* (Los Angeles, 2004), 48.
14. Friedrich Berger, 'From Circle and Square to the Image of the World: A Possible Interpretation for Some Petroglyphs of Merels Boards', *Rock Art Research*, 21(1) (2004), 11.
15. For an overview of all the variations upon 'three in a row' board games see Harold J. R. Murrey, *A History of Board Games Other Than Chess* (Oxford, 1952).
16. Berger, 11.
17. Pritchard, 177–180.
18. Detailed examples of mason's marks, as distinct from less formal graffiti, can be found in F. W. Brooks, 'Masons Marks', *Journal of East Yorkshire Local History Society* (1961); Jennifer Alexander, 'The Introduction and Use of Masons' Marks in Romanesque Buildings in England', *Medieval Archaeology*, 51 (2007), 63–81.
19. T. D. Atkinson, 'On Some Consecration Crosses in East Anglian Churches', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society*, 11(1906), 255–262.
20. Atkinson, 255.
21. Atkinson, 256.
22. Arnold Pacey, *Medieval Architectural Drawing* (Stroud, 2007), 77–78; for a detailed account of stonemasons design techniques see Matthew Champion, 'Architectural Inscriptions: New Discoveries in East Anglia', *Church Archaeology*, 16(2010), 65–80; and Rosie Harris Adamson, 'Stonemasons Drawings on Building Fabric: Diversity, Form and Function', *Archaeological Journal*, 171 (2014), 258–288.
23. Pacey, 78–83; Timothy Easton, 'Ritual Marks on Historic Timber', *The Mortice and Tenon*, 7, (Spring 1988).
24. Matthew Champion, 'The Graffiti Inscriptions of St Mary's Church, Troston', *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, 43(2), (2015), 235–258.
25. Rosie Harris Adamson, 'Stonemasons Drawings on Building Fabric: Diversity, Form and Function', *Archaeological Journal*, 171(2014), 258–288; Pacey, 33–58.
26. A series of large-scale excavations along the Thames waterfront during the 1970s and 1980s by the Museum of London recovered a mass of medieval artefacts relating to everyday trade and activity in the city. The excavations recovered in excess of three hundred knives; during the same period only four sets of dividers were recovered. Cowgill, de Neergaard and Griffiths, *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London 1: Knives and Scabbards* (London, 1987), 78.
27. Harris Adamson, 260–262.
28. Pacey, 82–83.; Reginald Hine, *Relics of an Uncommon Attorney* (London, 1951), 206–215; David Sherlock, Ashwell Church, *Medieval Drawings and Writings* (Ashwell, 1978).

29. John Stabb, *Devon Church Antiquities*, Vol. 1 (London, 1909), 22, 31.
30. Mary Curtis Webb, *Ideas and Images in Twelfth Century Sculpture* (privately published at: [lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/001/879/684/RUG01-001879684\\_2012\\_0001\\_AC.pdf](http://lib.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/001/879/684/RUG01-001879684_2012_0001_AC.pdf)), 159–161.
31. Curtis Webb, 126.
32. Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, *The Cathedral Builders of the Middle Ages* (London, 1995), 37–39. Nicola Coldstream, *Medieval Craftsmen: Masons and Sculptors* (London, 1991), 15–18.
33. Pacey, 52–57.
34. The Museum of London waterfront excavations of the 1970s and 1980s recovered 57 examples of these shears. Cowgill, de Neergaard and Griffiths, 78.
35. Cowgill, de Neergaard and Griffiths, 51–61.
36. Udo Becker (ed.), ‘The Pentagram’, *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Symbols* (New York, 1994), 230.
37. Phillip Carr-Gomm and Richard Heygate, *The Book of English Magic* (London, 2009), 477–510.
38. The original manuscript is BL Cotton Nero A.x. The quotations for this chapter are taken from Simon Armitage (Trans), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London, 2007).
39. BL Cotton Nero A.x., lines 623–624.
40. BL Cotton Nero A.x., line 664.
41. BL Cotton Nero A.x., lines 658–660.
42. The story appears in the Jewish and Islamic tradition, although more emphasis is placed upon the miraculous powers of the ring in the Islamic tradition. See ‘Solomon’, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, at: [www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13842-solomon](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13842-solomon). Accessed 12 December 2014.
43. Matthew Champion, ‘Late Medieval Painted Decoration at St Edmunds Church, Acle’, *Norfolk Archaeology*, 47 (2013), 462–466.
44. Timothy Easton, ‘Ritual Marks on Historic Timber’, *Weald and Downland Museum Newsletter* (Spring 1999), 24.
45. Timothy Easton and Jeremy Hodgkinson, ‘Apotropaic Symbols on Cast-Iron Firebacks’, *Journal of the Antique Metalware Society*, 21 (2013), 17.
46. Pritchard, Doris Jones-Baker also recognised the unlikelihood of the symbol being simply heraldic and suggested a link with pilgrimage. However, if this were the case then a concentration of such images could be expected at or around major sites of pilgrimage. No such concentration has yet been identified. Doris Jones-Baker, ‘Some Medieval Votive Graffiti in English Churches’, *Rheinisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde*, 37(7) (1996), 127–146.
47. Ruth Mellinkoff, *Averting Demons: The Protective Power of Medieval Visual Motifs and Themes* (Los Angeles, 2004).
48. Thomas, 215–217.
49. Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), 90.
50. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, 1992), 282–283.
51. Warwick Rodwell, *The Archaeology of Churches* (Stroud, 2nd edition, 2012), 349.
52. Peake, 150–151.
53. Peake, 150.
54. See the work of Timothy Easton and Bob Meeson.
55. Eamon Duffy, ‘The Parish, Piety and Patronage in Late Medieval East Anglia: The Evidence of Rood Screens’, in French, K. L., Gibbs, G. and Kumin, B. (eds), *The Parish in English Life, 1400–1640* (Manchester, 1997), 133–162.

# 3

## Apotropaic Symbols and Other Measures for Protecting Buildings against Misfortune

*Timothy Easton*

This chapter is based principally on research carried out in the East Anglian county of Suffolk since the early 1970s, but many of the symbols noted here have been seen or reported elsewhere in Britain and abroad. Although most of these symbols are found on domestic buildings such as houses, stables and barns, it is (as said above) to churches that we should look to identify the origins of some of them. A comparison between the marks found in the two types of buildings should help to explain the different uses (or hopes) for which the various symbols were intended. All places referred to are in Suffolk unless otherwise stated. Some examples of symbols are not illustrated here, but there may be a reference to a published article in which they can be seen.

### **First thoughts about the mark makers**

There are, of course, many marks, known as ‘assembly marks’, which were made by carpenters as a part of the construction process.<sup>1</sup> It was in the early 1970s that it first began to be thought that some of the scribed symbols found on timber-framed buildings were not simply assembly marks, but may have had an alternative meaning. Because these symbols nearly always appeared alongside entrances (doors, windows, and chimneys), it was suggested that they might have been evil-averting (apotropaic) symbols. Once this idea became established it was possible to assemble the marks into categories and to suggest meanings and possible origins for them depending on their specific locations.<sup>2</sup>

Some similar symbols are found on brick or stone buildings, but looking at marks on timber has two distinct advantages: one is to establish a date-range for the practice, and the second is to show that the majority of the earlier marks (dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) were made by craftsmen using their trade tools. When these marks were applied

to newly-cut timber for the frames, they were done, as were most other 'assembly' marks, with a scribing tool called a rase knife.<sup>3</sup> This made a distinctive depth of line. Because the freshly prepared surface had not yet hardened the deep concave grooves made by the hooked blades of rase knives cut across the surface easily, and were therefore reasonably crisp. When symbols were added at a later date to timber which had already hardened, the rase knife could easily be deflected by the grain as it was pulled towards the craftsman. The line was not so sure, and small splinters could appear as the blade crossed the grain. It was observations like these that helped to establish whether it was the original carpenter who had made the symbols. With knowledge of the age of the building, and sometimes with a very precise date obtained by dendrochronology, it is now possible to say with certainty when some of the symbols were applied to wooden surfaces. With marks on most other materials, however, such precise dating is not possible.

This comparison between original and later symbols holds good only for marks made with a rase knife. When carpenters used other tools to mark the timber, such as the scratch awl, the point of a knife, or dividers, the lines made were much thinner. With compass-drawn circles where there is a fixed point of control, there can be considerable difficulty in deciding whether they are contemporary or added much later. This is because the compass-made arcs are less likely to be deflected than the deeper hand-cut rase knife symbols. Despite this general uncertainty there are clear cases where the lighter lines were contemporaneous with the rase knife marks, as will be explained later. It seems certain that when house owners came to understand the language of protective marks they too could, and sometimes did, add their own.<sup>4</sup>

### **Classification of marks**

Some of the most striking marks are those that resemble letters. This is because of the frequency with which they occur at the parts of buildings known to be vulnerable, such as doors, windows and hearth areas. The most common were those selected from the combination of the letters that form part of the name MARIA or were formerly applied to the worship of the Virgin Mary. In approximate descending order of frequency are M, two combined Vs appearing as a W, AM, R, combinations of M with an adjacent R, MR or AMR combined, P and V (Figure 3.1). Dealing with them in approximately the same order some, possibly all can be shown to have developed from the letters associated with the Virgin's name as used before the Reformation.

The worship of Mary's images had reached its apogee during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The Reformation forbade prayers directed to saints, of whom Mary had been the most frequently addressed. Earlier images



*Figure 3.1* A combination of angular symbols that originally derive from initials in the Virgin Mary's name. These comprise M, R, I and A: The symbol on the extreme left is not so common and may derive from the Chi-Rho symbol. The heavier lines represent those made with a rase knife while the lighter Multi Ms are done with a sharp pointed tool. Drawn from rase knife copies in oak made by Rick Lewis

of the Virgin of Mercy, spreading her cloak around worshippers kneeling beside her, aptly illustrate the prevailing belief in her supreme protective powers, but once the zeal of the reformers began to take hold the majority of images of Mary, if not hidden, were smashed, scratched over, burnt, or taken abroad. Such images were forbidden after the mid-sixteenth century. The letters making up her name, often located next to altars and niches dedicated to her, escaped without defacement.<sup>5</sup> These ciphers seem not to have posed a threat to the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century iconoclasts, as many thousands of them remain intact. Perhaps it was the recognition of this by craftsmen living through and after this turmoil that encouraged them to continue adding these simplified Marian letters to vulnerable areas. However, after the mid-sixteenth century the letters thus scribed were presumably not intended as a direct request for the Virgin's aid. Because such letters had originally been close to images that were the focus of particular requests for protection, perhaps they were now seen as useful *in their own right* as apotropaic marks.

The straight cutting blade of many rase knives will generally not encourage the curved marks found in earlier, more elaborate Marian symbols in churches, so the majority of the post-medieval symbols and letters on timber are formed with short straight lines. This is particularly noticeable where the curved part of a capital 'R' was formed. Instead of a half circle, it would be composed of two short-joined angled strokes (Figure 3.1). There is another type of rase knife with two fixed points.<sup>6</sup> This was used to cut small circular marks, but does not seem to have been used to make most of these apotropaic letter forms.

The individual letters used in this apotropaic way were as follows:

- 1) **M.** This letter, seen in pre-Reformation ciphers around image niches and on panels in glass and ornamental masonry in churches, represented the abbreviated name of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This symbol was applied to all forms of buildings made in different materials. A clear example is seen on the fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century priest's door of Nayland

Church where, at the end of the donor's inscription carved in relief on the door, is a single carved M.<sup>7</sup> As this raised letter is partly covered by the original hinge, the M must also be original. At that date there can be no doubt that it stood for 'Mary'. Many church doorways have scribed Ms on the stonework as well as on their walls.<sup>8</sup> Although these door symbols may have been applied before the 1550s they are nonetheless indicative of the simple adoption of the first letter of Mary's name by the occupants of houses as one of the most common of the evil-averting (apotropaic) symbols. Apotropaic crowned Ms were used as talismans on aristocratic rings at this time.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1660s, when a new school-room was converted out of an earlier seventeenth-century upper room in a small market hall in Debenham, two new internal doors were provided. One was at the head of the first flight of stairs, and the other led from the corner of the schoolroom to the attic. Both doors have a large scribed M on the side facing into the room.<sup>10</sup>

Horizontally scribed Ms are sometimes found on the edges of door planks. The explanation has to be that, before assembly, the carpenters marked up the edge of a plank, lengthways on, using a rase knife. One of these is clearly made on the edge of a door leading to a rarely-used storage space in a small low attic in Wood Farm, Otley. The scratching noises made in autumn and winter by creatures moving into such dark spaces for hibernation may have concerned the occupants of the house, who worried that they might be the witches' familiars. The door at Wood Farm had a hole cut at its base to allow a cat to enter, and there are other symbols on both sides. Similarly, there is a sideways-on M scribed on a seventeenth-century door leading up to a tower stair in the south aisle of Durham Cathedral.<sup>11</sup> The dark stairs and less visited parts of ecclesiastical buildings were considered just as worrying as domestic attics.

2) The **W** is a variant of the M symbol and comes from the concatenation of two Vs. In the late medieval period this symbol would, as said before, refer to the Virgin, as in the sung lament, 'O Virgo Virginum (Virgin of Virgins)', which was used in prayers and sung responses before the Reformation.<sup>12</sup> Pre-Reformation carved forms of this double V were used in a similar way to the crowned Ms. At Cartmel Abbey in Cumbria a pair of crowned Ws was carved either side of the perke (perch) on a fifteenth-century misericord.<sup>13</sup> Another example is at St Columba's Church, St Columb Major in Cornwall, where a crowned W was used on an early sixteenth-century bench-end.<sup>14</sup> Crowned Ws were painted on the fifteenth-century pulpit in Fotheringhay Church, Northamptonshire. Occasionally the two letters M and W are found side-by-side, as on two seventeenth-century candle-marked ceilings in Suffolk.<sup>15</sup> Whichever way you viewed them, they would appear similar – a sort of visual palindrome. Perhaps the

knowledge that these two symbols could be inverted and still remain the same gave them greater power. An example of the W and M being scribed together is on a chimney lintel in The Swan, Worlingworth.<sup>16</sup>

- 3) R is also frequently observed inscribed into timber, quite often close to an M, but sometimes on its own.<sup>17</sup> If the theory of these letters being apotropaic is correct the R would originally have implied 'Regina', for Mary, as Queen of Heaven. In the elaborated Marian cipher the R is formed in the right half of the all-embracing curved M.<sup>18</sup>
- 4) The letter P is more problematic: it has been suggested that it may have stood for 'Puella', meaning 'young girl', or for 'Pax', meaning 'Peace', but neither of these suggestions is entirely convincing. The P could also be interpreted as the Greek letter *Rho*, or R, as in the second element of the *Chi-Rho* symbol, but again that is not convincing as an explanation for this letter on its own.<sup>19</sup> Like the capital letter R, the P is commonly found inscribed on church walls and around church doors; it is also found inscribed in houses. As stated previously, marks scribed into timber using the carpenter's tools of choice are mostly angular in character and so resemble earlier runic letters, which also were cut into wood. This resemblance has led some commentators to suggest that the marks may be from the runic tradition rather than simple letters of our roman alphabet. The X form set between two vertical lines, which closely resembles a part of the runic alphabet, appears in many churches and houses, and has been claimed to represent the symbol for *dagez* (day) as a good luck symbol. However runic interpretation seems inherently unlikely: most of the symbols we are dealing with are post-1600, and the runic alphabet ceased to be current about 600 years earlier.
- 5) AMR and AM. The integrated letters of Mary's name, seen in decorative panels on the outside of churches, are not usually found in domestic buildings, but combinations of some letters are used at an early date (Figure 3.1). An A, without the horizontal bar and with the M formed within the two sloping outer lines, is not uncommon (Figure 3.1). This combined AM symbol can sometimes represent another form of capital A, and can also be found standing for ALPHA, especially if placed next to Omega.<sup>20</sup> With all the other evidence, it seems likely that when used in domestic buildings its direct borrowing from Marian niches is the most likely explanation. This is confirmed when two extra angled lines, like the mathematical 'is greater than' sign, are added to create the attached R to make AMR (Figure 3.1). Combinations and variants of these are found on a later sixteenth-century hearth beam in Mendlesham.<sup>21</sup> A large combined AM symbol is scribed on the front of a late-medieval door just inside Morton's Tower at the entrance to Lambeth Palace.

When we observe the integrated letters that spell out 'Maria' around niches in churches, there is a natural assumption that the monogram simply

confirms the statue with which it was formerly associated.<sup>22</sup> However, on many East Anglian porches and towers the profusion of these symbols in each location indicates a more unusual dedication honouring Mary's name, and possibly appealing for protection of the building. What is not so evident is how this memory of her name became reinterpreted as a more personal apotropaic symbol on internal parts of houses, furnishings and possibly on items kept in proximity to the wearer in an age of Puritanism, when such symbols would be either unusual or forbidden.

That the conjoined AMR symbol has all the letters to spell out MARIA, and that this form of monogram originally used the letters from her name to evoke personal protection on the areas to which it was applied, is perhaps borne out by a comparatively recent discovery in 2014 at the British Museum. When six desiccated bodies were examined in depth for an exhibition, using the latest investigative equipment including infra-red reflectography, the Greek letters MIXAHA were found tattooed as a monogram on the inner thigh of a female dating from AD 655–775.<sup>23</sup> These integrated letters stood for the Archangel Michael, in much the same way as the integrated Marian letters and monograms were used to denote and honour her name. St Michael was particularly worshipped in Nubia in early medieval times for personal protection, and this could be a prime reason for such a personal monogram in early Christianity: this would have acted as a talisman in a similar way to the Marian monograms and single letters, often found on jewellery.<sup>24</sup>

### **Other symbols**

Some rase knives possess another two fixed spikes to cut small circular symbols. As circles these too could be used for independent apotropaic symbols adjacent to straight line symbols, but they are less often used in combination as protective marks. Carpenters did use straight lines and semi-circles together in their numbering and assembly marks, but it is their location that guides the decision as to whether they were used for practical or apotropaic reasons.

### **Spectacle and consecration marks**

Rase knife circles, frequently seen with additional arcs but sometimes left incomplete, were often added to chimney beams, doors and the back, unlit, side of late-medieval hall screens.<sup>25</sup> A particularly significant form is the 'spectacle mark' (Figure 3.2e). This is made up of two circles with a half-circle joining the two 'lenses' together. These are expressed singly as well as in multiples: seven appear with many other symbols on a hall hearth beam in 96 High Street, Blakeney, Norfolk. The largest single example noted is placed centrally on a hearth beam in 2 Church Terrace, Huntingfield: the diameter of each circle is 48mm and the total width is 130mm, compared

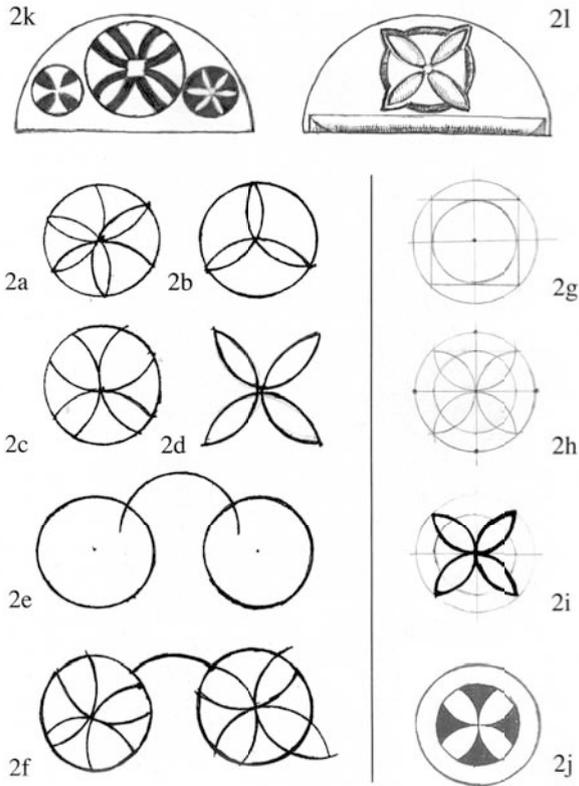


Figure 3.2 Circular symbols found in houses, barns and stables. (a) Hexafoil; (b) Triquetra; (c) 'consecration mark' in circle; (d) 'consecration' mark; (e) spectacle mark; (f) spectacle mark with 'consecration marks' in each lens; (g)–(j) Stages in making the 'consecration' cross using compass and set square; (k)–(l) Norman symbols in lunettes to protect portals in two Cornish churches; (k) Tympanum from Rame church, circa 1100 with, from left, 'consecration' cross, 'consecration' symbol (mark) and hexafoil; (l) Tympanum from Mylor church, circa 1100, with central 'consecration' symbol (mark)

with the more normal 25mm and 55mm. A particularly clear example can be seen at Moat Farm at Hestley Green, where there are three spectacle marks spaced out evenly in a horizontal line across a long hearth beam in the hall.

Although this symbol was first found in Suffolk, it has been observed also on hearth beams in Norfolk and Sussex, so it is likely to have had a more universal distribution in Britain. Since spectacles were still relatively uncommon in country districts in the seventeenth century they must have seemed 'magical' in helping to restore eyesight. However, it may be that the

association of spectacles with eyes suggested this symbol for averting the 'evil eye' in the same way as the familiar glass symbols found everywhere in Italy, Greece and Crete.

A more obvious compass-made ocular representation to avert the evil eye is found amongst other apotropaic symbols on the dark side of a sixteenth-century hall screen at Street Farm, Wickham Skeith. By using four compass-made arcs, two scribed horizontally bisected by two shorter vertical arcs, the 'eye' is perfectly formed. To make the 'spectacle mark' even more potent, extra arcs could be added into each 'lens' (Figure 3.2f). Four extra arcs like this make up the symbols called consecration crosses that are found in many of our churches. Variations of these in reverse form (Figures 3.2c, 3.2d and 3.2i), here called 'consecration marks', were used also in houses and agricultural buildings.<sup>26</sup> The design inscribed within each 'lens' of some spectacle marks can be read either way, but when it is not contained within circles it reads only as the reverse form of the consecration cross (Figure 3.2i).

As said before, consecration crosses are symbols traditionally applied on all new churches before being blessed by the bishop.<sup>27</sup> They were situated at a suitable height for the Bishop to mount some steps to bless each with holy water, and can vary slightly in form and size, but the most commonly found were made with four arcs within concentric circles, evenly distributed and touching a single central point, so that the outer points of each arc bisect or bypass the outer ring (Figure 3.2j). Because in England these are usually coloured red, the infilled segments make a distinct and familiar patterned cross. Although there are several ways to formally construct these designs, the diagram (Figures 3.2g–3.2j) shows four stages; before the red colour is added to the last usual ecclesiastical design, the alternative way to 'read' this third stage (Figure 3.2i) is the reverse of (Figure 3.2j). This is here distinguished as the 'consecration mark' usually found in secular buildings, rather than a consecration cross. (Figures 3.2c and 3.2d).

To put these two forms of 'consecration marks' into an earlier context, together with another symbol to be discussed in the following section, the symbols on two tympani above Norman church doorways in Cornwall are shown in Figures 3.2k and 3.2l. The earliest designs used by the Normans in England were simple, adapted from surviving iconography on Roman sarcophagi and gravestones. These examples are not intended as consecration crosses in the sense of the single blessed ones found on church walls, but instead proclaimed Christian triumphalism over the portals of Mylor and Rame churches.

Two of the three symbols from Rame (Figure 3.2k) are most useful here for the purpose of identifying those used in domestic contexts, which were not officially blessed by the clergy. The symbol on the left is the 'Greek' or 'Maltese' cross that was used for the ecclesiastical 'consecration mark' in churches (Figure 3.2j) but it does not feature on the walls of houses and barns. On the right is the hexafoil (Figure 3.2a), and the middle one is the reverse design of the consecration cross. This last form becomes most explicit

with the central symbol from Mylor (Figure 3.2l, see also Figure 3.2i). This will be referred to as the 'consecration mark' for the domestic examples.

### Multifoils and circles

Of all the multi-foil symbols, the compass-scribed hexafoil is the most familiar circular pattern which people often say they made as children because it was a satisfying design. It has six arcs interlinked at a central point within a circle (Figure 3.2a). These symbols vary greatly: in some the arcs were left unfinished; some have three (Figure 3.2b) or twelve arcs;



Figure 3.3 (a) The front of an oak boarded chest, possibly made by Richard Harris and dated either 1570 or 1670. Apart from the three hexafoils, other symbols found in the inverted lunettes under the lid front are W and Vs; next to RICHARD is an inverted V and then an X symbol with a central line making the butterfly mark, and below HARRIS on right are M or W and V. (formerly T. Easton); (b) A mid-sixteenth-century oak boarded chest. The main area is made up with conjoined hexafoils and a spinning sun symbol top left. The lower symbols in the 'spandrils' is of particular interest for its variations of carved hexafoils, two 'consecration' crosses and two 'consecration marks'. The crossed straight lines can be read as three X symbols or a large AM on the left spandril with an X on the right. (formerly Mary Bellis Antiques) Compare these symbols with the Rame tympanum (2k).

others consist of a plain circle with nothing inside it, and there can be many variations of radiating or interlinked rings. Without doubt these circular designs were the most frequently used symbols for averting evil. *Hexafoil* is used here as a generic term because other names frequently used to describe this symbol, such as 'daisy wheel' and 'marigold' (Mary's Gold), imply flowers, femininity and an association with the Virgin Mary. However this design has, a long association as a sun symbol which was usually considered masculine, whether as Apollo the sun god, or later as Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup> They first appear as solar wheels on stone and rock engraving in prehistoric times. In more recent times these symbols were applied to all types of buildings, whatever their construction, and they are found also on furniture, domestic containers and household equipment. On medieval church chests these hexafoils can appear to be mere decoration, with no certain apotropaic use. However, certain later pieces demonstrate a layout which, when combined with other symbols, strongly suggest that the hexafoils were applied for apotropaic reasons (Figures 3.3a and 3.3b). An example above a fireplace in Wood Farm, Otley, has triple hexafoils forming the central part of the three circular patterns of a seemingly decorative late seventeenth-century wall painting. Although the glue-based paint has faded from two of these, the compass-drawn designs in the plaster are clear to see. The central hexafoiled design is treated differently and has a range of marks around its circumference that gives the strong impression of a spinning sun, rather like a Catherine wheel.<sup>29</sup>

Although hexafoil designs are commonly found within houses in the expected places such as on hearth beams, and during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on internal pine doors, by far the most common application was in agricultural buildings and stables.<sup>30</sup> These will be dealt with later under the section 'Other locations'.

The larger hexafoils and multifoils inscribed into plaster or masonry were nearly always made with dividers, or with small metal shears,<sup>31</sup> and not with rase knives. A good example of the twelve-arc symbol was cut out of a timber plank in 1630 as a ventilation grill for a storage cupboard beneath a stair to a parlour chamber in Bedfield Hall. This is identical to a medieval depiction of the Wheel of Fortune, and a connection could have been intended in selecting this form.<sup>32</sup> Dark spaces below stairs seem to have been as worrying as the upper stairs to attics, both of which were usually unlit zones. Although multifoil symbols were usually applied to masonry and timber within houses, they have turned up also on plaster surfaces. An interesting early example, on the original dark-painted plastered kitchen ceiling in Bedfield Hall made in 1620, was found hidden under layers of lime wash in 1983 (Figure 3.4).<sup>33</sup> The application of dark paint is highly unusual, as new ceilings were usually left unpainted. There is archaeological proof that this paint is original to the dendro-chronologically-dated wing, and it can only be explained as creating a dark background for the large range of circular symbols scribed through

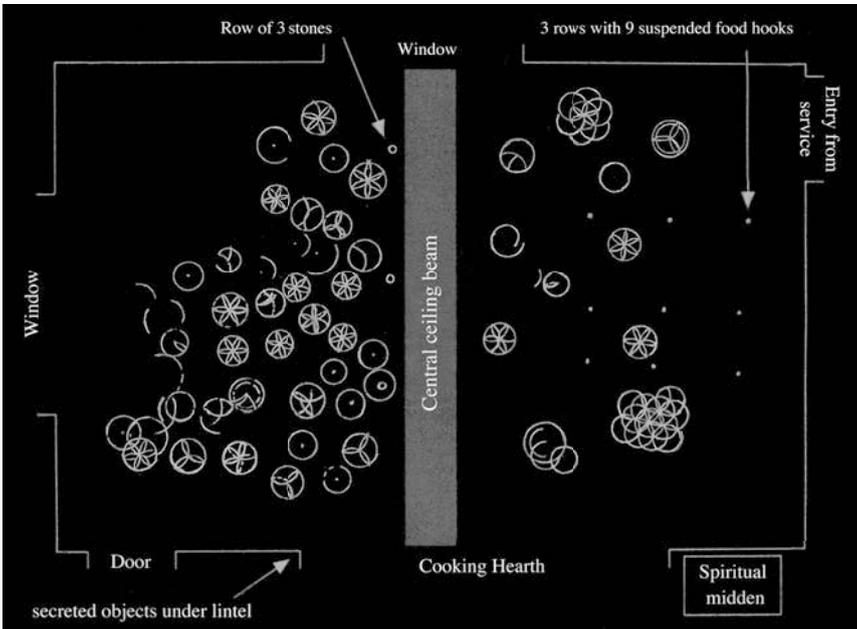


Figure 3.4 Bedfield Hall, dark painted and scribed plaster ceiling in the kitchen of 1620 made for Thomas Dunston

it. On one side of the central binding beam the layout is more precise and sparse, because each circular symbol was placed in between three rows of triple hooks that were hammered into parallel joists. This area was for suspending herbs and possibly preserved meats on the nine hooks. At the outer limits of this zone reserved for food the internal single circular symbols give way to two integrated clusters which acknowledge the special protection given to this zone. These were intended as powerful barriers. In the same way that an ecclesiastical cross, holy water or oil and any church property could be misappropriated and adapted by feared spirits or malevolent people with evil intent, so too could this form of circular cluster be adapted with the judicious placement of magical words to make up an incantation to perform an act of necromancy.<sup>34</sup> On the other side of the same room some of the contents of the kitchen were hung on hooks and shelves attached to the walls. The ceiling was unencumbered and has received a scattered range of about 36 circular symbols with many variations. Although complete hexafoils are repeated in ten places over the ceiling, the impression is here made that by 1620 these were regarded more as symbols of stars, rather than the sun. The approximate representation of a star map here fits in better to this particular period when there was a greater interest in astronomy and astrology amongst the lower gentry

classes. In a line parallel to the central beam are three small areas where stones have been embedded in the wet plaster. The stone now visible is a distinct red colour, the middle one has fallen out leaving a depression, and the third is still buried, but is slowly emerging through the painted surface. The numbers and colours here may be relevant, with the combination of three, nine and red: these will be examined under the section 'Diamond' further on. As this was the working kitchen of a gentleman farmer called Thomas Dunston (1580s to 1657), there were certain things about this room that could have left him worried about misfortune. Although it is likely that by 1620 almost all the windows in this medieval house that was renovated in the early seventeenth century were glazed, the lower windows in this new kitchen retain the only evidence for shutter rails. The two windows that lit this room were either left unglazed, or casements were left open to help the hearth function efficiently. The knowledge that the open chimney throat and these windows would have been vulnerable to incursions by feared malevolent spirits may have been a major factor. Kitchens were most vulnerable to cooking accidents and the outbreak of fire.<sup>35</sup> At other times in the next century other objects and faunal materials were hidden around this hearth in an attempt to keep harm away. Thomas Dunston was remembered more than 100 years after his death for challenging the devil to a 'duel' in the form of a ploughing match. 'He put iron spikes in the swath where his antagonist (the devil) was to work.'<sup>36</sup>

## Hearts

Apart from the most obvious interpretation for the heart being used as a symbol of love, it is also found in circumstances that confirm a protective role. A door into a first-floor chamber at Bedingfield Hall has on it an inscribed heart with an hexafoil inside (Figure 3.5a). At some point this door had been used in the seventeenth-century attic above, for a corner had been removed to fit the door-surround still in place between the chimney and the sloping rafter in the floor above. Attics seemed to have been targeted for marks and other deposits because these upper spaces were often dark and infrequently visited in the winter months. These symbols may have been applied to the door for its attic location, but the room to which the door has probably returned also has a ceiling significantly covered with candle-marked symbols, possibly applied in the 1660s, so the door marks could be appropriate to either place.

Like the letters M and W, the apotropaic heart may have been used because of its former association with the Virgin Mary.<sup>37</sup> It is not uncommon to find the heart associated with both Jesus and Mary on pre-Reformation bench-ends. Good examples of this for the Virgin are found in St Columba church, Cornwall (heart and M, Figure 3.5b) on an early sixteenth-century

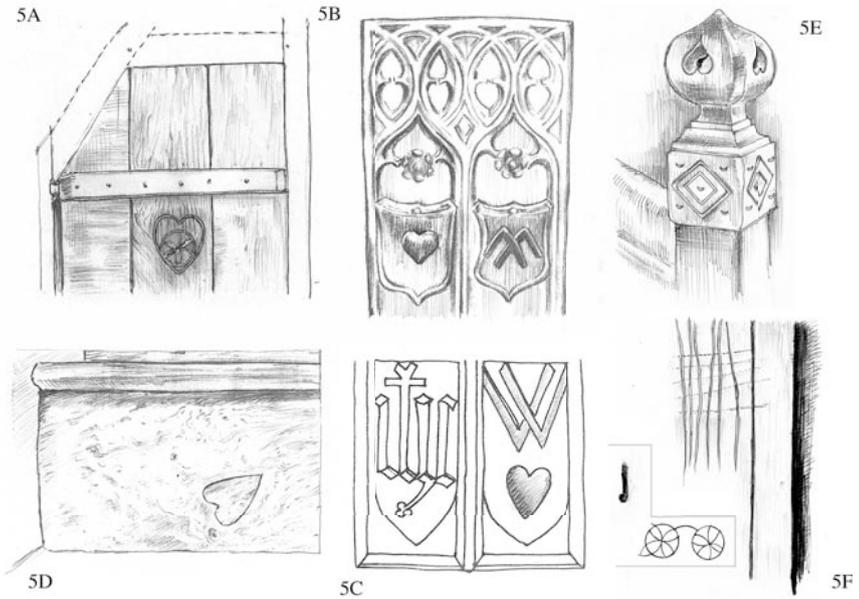


Figure 3.5 (a) Bedingfield Hall, scribed heart with incomplete hexafoil inside; (b) St Columba's church, St Columb Major, Cornwall. Early sixteenth-century bench end; (c) St Mawgan-in-Pydar, Cornwall. Early sixteenth-century bench end; (d) Bedfield Hall. Inset heart-shaped patch replaced a knot-hole in an oak riser of an attic stair; (e) Flemings Hall, Bedingfield. Carved newel post near attic; (f) Wood Farm, Otley. Reverse side of attic door with scribed grid and spectacle mark near latch slot: symbols moved closer together for this drawing

bench end in St Mawgan and St Nicholas' Church, St Mawgan-in-Pydar, Cornwall (heart with VV above, Figure 3.5c).<sup>38</sup> For the two panels carved on this bench end, the Christ monogram appears on its own, whereas the integrated VV is placed above Mary's heart. So far no obvious apotropaic Christ symbols have been found in English domestic buildings, so the Marian route for this adoption of the heart seems the more likely. The combination of the hexafoil and the heart in close proximity to one another would be taken for granted in Romania, where today the former is not only ubiquitous, but is still remembered as a protective sun symbol.<sup>39</sup>

The unlit stairs leading to attics were often targets for marking in some way; the upper flight before the attic door in the west wing of Bedfield Hall is also marked by a heart. When it was constructed in 1619/20, one of the risers had a knot-hole in the plank, and the carpenter has carefully cut this out in the shape of an oak heart and inserted a perfect match into the resulting space (Figure 3.5d). This task had to be done during the

preparations before the stairs were erected within the house. The open hole might have been viewed with suspicion as a place where a familiar could lurk: the heart sealed this over forever.

Frequently the stairs of grander houses were more formally carved with similar apotropaic symbols. On the last rise into the attic at Flemings Hall, Beddingfield, is a newel post that has four hearts cut into the knob: this surmounts four diamonds with half-moon shapes around each (Figure 3.5e). There are also small random punched circles in the handrail leading away from this newel post. Hearts and diamonds were used in the carved symbolism on the staircase at Torrington Hall, Stoke-by-Nayland.

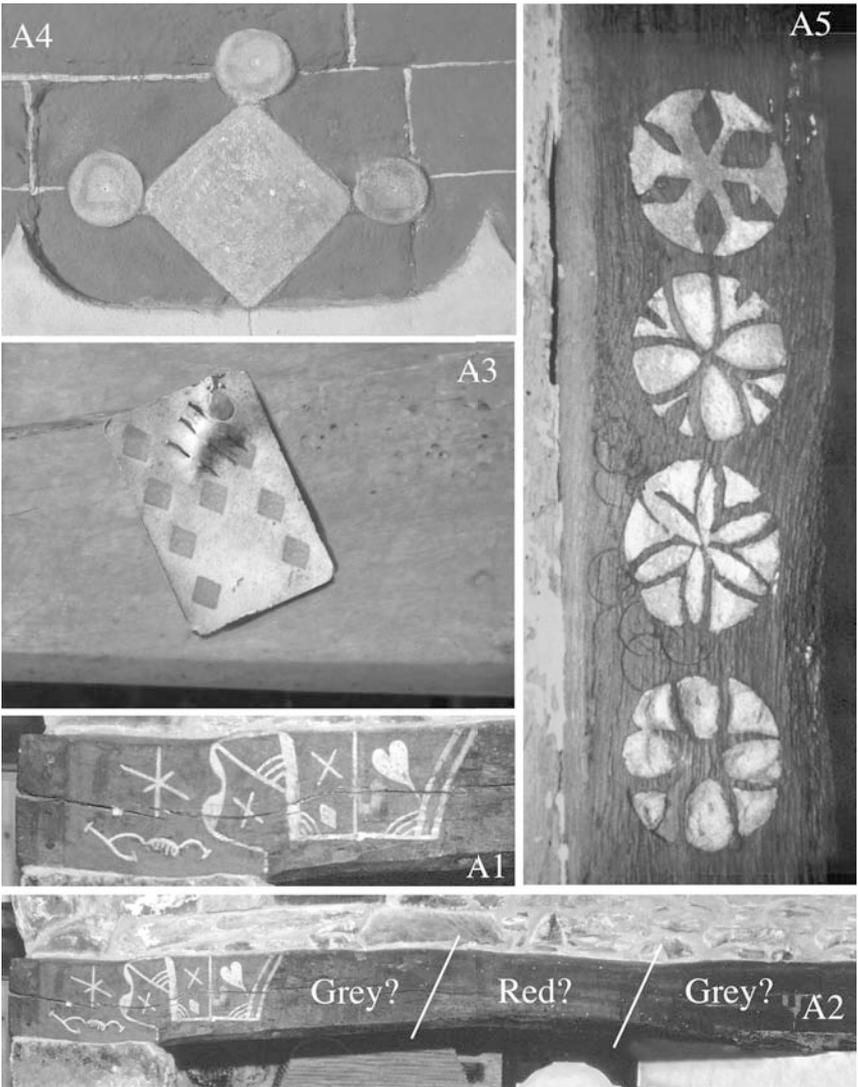
Around 1600 the hall hearth beam of a farmhouse, Pwll-y-Gele Mawr, Llanfechreth, near Dolgellau, Wales, was painted in wide alternating bands of colour along its length (Photograph 3.A2). The last red-painted zone at one end had some extra designs added other than for decorative reasons (Photograph 3.A1). On a red field bordered with white lines a single heart and diamond are prominent among the symbols. Between them is another symbol resembling a horseshoe. On the extreme left, two other symbols appear to represent a plough with a star form above. Two X crosses were placed on the grey and red panels and to complete the apotropaic assemblage, three groups of triple lines making up the number nine. It is not uncommon to find the apotropaic symbols clustered at one end of a hearth beam.<sup>40</sup> This is also most likely where such a painted design is neither heraldic nor decorative, as designs for the latter purpose would more likely be centred.

## Diamonds

The explanation for the apotropaic diamond is not so clear, though there is the obvious link between hearts and diamonds within a pack of playing cards. The linked use of the colour red, perhaps being feminine, may be a factor. Found affixed to an upper hearth beam in Mill Farm, Worlingworth, was an eighteenth-century playing card showing the nine of diamonds (Photograph 3.A3). This was nailed through one of the diamonds and had three pins pierced through the card. Here we find that the number three is both primary and important, but so is the three by three, making nine. So, perhaps, were the three stones and nine hooks on the specially prepared ceiling in the kitchen at Bedfield Hall. Remembering the lines spoken by the three weird sisters as they foretell Macbeth's destiny at their first meeting on the moor, we can understand this magic power of the triplicate:

'Thrice to thine and thrice to mine and thrice again to make up nine. Peace! the charm's wound up'.<sup>41</sup>

The combination of the number three and the diamond may also be the reason for the unusual design chosen for the decoration of the 1630 parlour-chamber fireplace at Bedfield Hall.<sup>42</sup> In relief and set against the ruddled and pencilled (red painted with white lines) brickwork is a single



*Photograph 3.A* (1) Pywll-y-Gele Mawr, Llanfechreth, Wales. Detail of apotropaic painted symbols at one end of hearth beam; (2) Pywll-y-Gele Mawr. The complete length of hall beam, showing three wide additional shadowed zones where plain bands of colour formerly existed, probably in alternating grey and red. Photograph by Ralph Merrifield has been digitally enhanced; (3) Mill Farm, Worlingworth. Adapted eighteenth-century playing card, using three pins, nailed to upper hearth beam. Part digital reconstruction as the card is now detached and framed; (4) Bedfield Hall. Mortared diamond surrounded by three painted circular mortared discs, 1630; (5) Newney Hall, Newney Green, Writtle, Essex. Stencil-painted apotropaic symbols using hexafoils and 'consecration' cross designs on an upper, internal door-post in an otherwise unpainted chamber. Note to the side of the paint on the left, earlier compass-made circles. Photo and information by Elphin and Brenda Watkin

diamond, the base of which surmounts a mortared decorative cresting. The other three points have three mortared circles attached in relief, each one having an inner red-painted circle (Photograph 3.A4). The three white circles here are echoed on the much publicised hearth floor in the Fleece Inn at Bretforton, Worcestershire (National Trust), said to prevent witches from entering: they call these ‘witch circles’.

### X Forms (Christian terms as Saltire, or St Andrew’s, Crosses)

In houses and churches these are most commonly found on window stay bars and door latches (Figure 3.6c). In Germany the temporary wooden centre posts of the barn entrances for the double doors to close against, known here as ‘standards’, were also incised with an X form to bar any misfortune (Figure 3.6a). It has been stated since the late nineteenth century that the same symbols are important to the so-called hex or witch-posts found beside the hearths in some Yorkshire and Lancashire houses (Figure 3.6b). These Xs

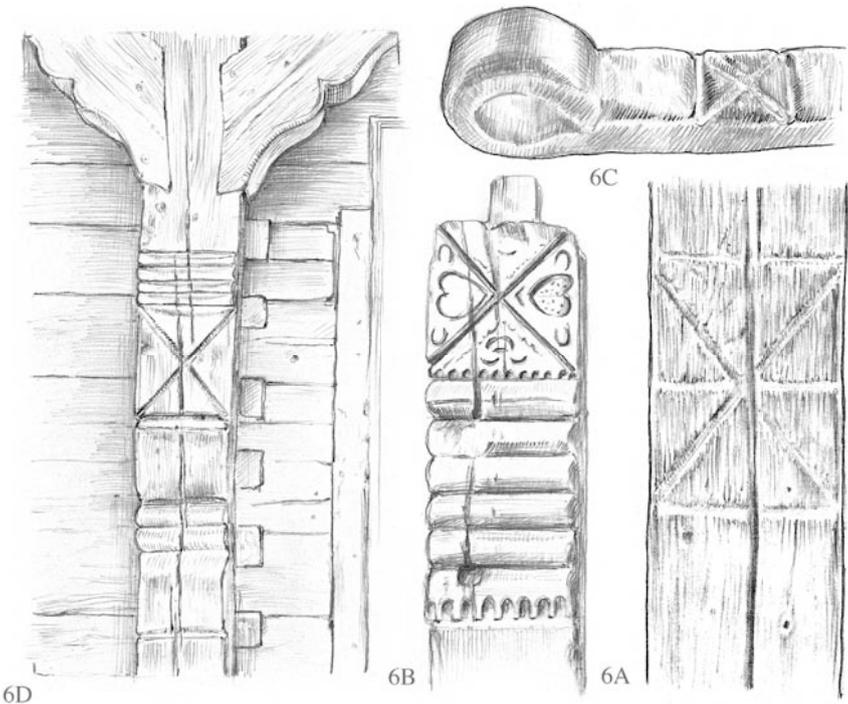


Figure 3.6 (a) Typical X-formed symbol carved into barn standard from Arnhem; (b) Top section of a ‘witch post’ from North York moors, now in Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford; (c) Bedfield Hall, window latch, circa 1840 with blacksmith-made X form; (d) Hoteni, Maramures, Romania. One of the carved upper posts supporting a roof of a reconstructed nineteenth century house

on each one were supposed to protect the hearth from entry by witches, but may have had a more general protective intention or possibly were blessed by a priest.<sup>43</sup> The ironmasters in the south-east of England were using these barrier signs, along with many of the other symbols already discussed, on some early firebacks.<sup>44</sup>

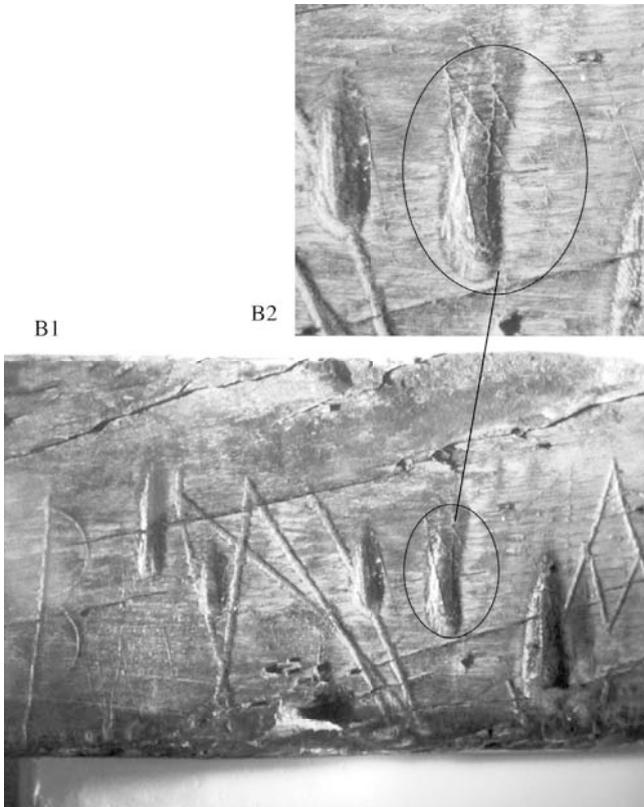
The metalwork in the apertures in both houses and churches carried a clear message. These symbols were intended as a deterrent to unwanted spirits and visitors. Because they are primary to the metalwork, it is the craftsmen who applied them: probably they were not asked to use them by their clients, but chose to do so universally as their barrier mark. A traditional blacksmith informed me that the two vertical lines represented the door jambs and the X form between them was a barrier forbidding entry. This explanation seems logical, but this symbol is an ancient sign used on other materials by many different cultures and, as with so many other familiar signs over millennia, it may have had different meanings in the past. Blacksmiths were harnessing a particular symbol to offer protection to new owners of their buildings. The owners and occupiers recognised the power that such symbols bestowed and copied their own crude scratched versions onto doors, walls and portable household objects. They are easily dismissed as accidental scratches, or scratches done by naughty children, until one notices these repeated X forms across the panels on furniture and panelled doors.<sup>45</sup>

## **Grid patterns**

Amongst the plethora of apotropaic symbols there are examples of crossed lines that make up a grid pattern, not always done with precision. A clear example of such a grid is found on the reverse of a late seventeenth-century door shutting off a stair to a roof void, used for storage rather than for sleeping, in Wood Farm, Otley (Figure 3.5f). The door is set within an oak frame which has a 'consecration mark' made with a rase knife on it, just under the door latch. Close to this, and on the edge of the door, is the sideways-on scribed M already described. On the reverse of the door is a clear spectacle mark with both lenses filled with a 'consecration mark' made with a rase knife (Figure 3.5f). Above this is the grid, which is perhaps a barrier warning or a net of entrapment, such as the web of a 'dreamcatcher'. Both symbols on the unlit side seem not intended viewing for the occupants, but rather would be 'seen' by any 'visitors' emerging from the space above. Only one low-ceilinged plastered space has been made within this roof, in the 'room' immediately above. This was to keep stored crops free from dust and water damage. Here, a painter has made a simple version of a candle-marked ceiling: once again this area is an infrequently visited space, which may have made the occupiers uneasy when scratching noises were heard above their ceilings. As discussed below in the chapter on professional involvement, the clearest grid forms are found on some of the candle-marked ceilings.<sup>46</sup>

## Burn marks

The last notable form of protective marking is not a symbol at all, but a deliberate burn mark made with a candle flame, taper or rush light. These are so common around hearths that building historians have assumed they were caused by the careless use of lights that accidentally burnt down too close to the timber. Arguably, this is one location in a house where a fixed light was least needed, partly because light would be given off by the fire, and also because householders were so fearful of the consequences of accidental fires that they would ensure that flames did *not* come in close contact with any building or household materials. There are many examples of the curious placement of these burn marks in unexpected cases, upside down or at right and other angles on timbers which were not re-used, that prove beyond doubt that some of them were made deliberately. One can find evidence of this not only in many houses, but also on the inside faces of East Anglian church doors, where such burn marks seem consistently and strategically placed. There can have been absolutely no reason to hang a candle or rush light on the reverse of such doors. Churches were particularly vulnerable to lightning strikes and the severe damage they could do to the fabric, particularly to towers. There are notable cases of fireballs entering into churches when divine services were being held, killing and maiming worshippers and exiting by doors.<sup>47</sup> In some cases the burn mark was placed close to a 'peep' hole in a church door. One such example from Saxtead church has the flame mark just below the hole and a scribed M positioned above it.<sup>48</sup> Peep holes like this, which occur in other church doors, may be a relic from pre-Reformation processional rituals, when a member of the congregation, located near the door, would watch for the moment the Bishop appeared to gain entry. Apart from giving protection to an area considered vulnerable to spirit entry (the hole in the door), one purpose of many of these burn marks, in churches, houses and occasionally in agricultural buildings, was probably to act like a form of inoculation against accidental fires. The act of deliberately touching the building with a flame seems intended to neutralise it against further harm. An example on a hall beam in 21 Shore Street, Anstruther, Fife, carries as many prominent burn marks as the large scribed 'letter' forms of symbols (Photograph 3.B). There is no proof that these were all made at one time, but this example is not alone in offering an even balance between the strength of the burn marks and the applied symbols. After one of these deep burn marks had been completed a lighter scribed M was marked over the top.<sup>49</sup> This probably demonstrates that this burn mark was singled out and given extra protective power. Householders were also worried by the risk of fires being started by lightning strikes, and there were parts of England where sections of the burnt Yule log were retained within the house after Christmas, and through to the following year when the new log was provided. Pieces of this partly burnt log were also placed on the



*Photograph 3.B* 21 Shore Street, Anstruther, Fife. Section of the scribed and burn marks on hearth beam. The detail of one burn mark shows additional lightly scribed M superimposed on top

*Source:* Photographed by Andrew Sherriff.

cattle byres to protect the animals from fire and 'all harm and disaster'.<sup>50</sup> The effects of the loss of the main wealth of a farming family could be devastating and could lead to a lasting family memory in the twentieth century: In one poignant case, four members of a family risked going into the burning byre to drive out the animals and all lost their lives, trapped initially by the panicking animals blocking up the entrance and then being overcome with some.<sup>51</sup>

Although the prevention of accidental fires may have been the major reason for applying a flame to timber along with the other scribed symbols, there are likely to have been other motivations. The chimney was the ever-open aperture which could not be closed, so, as with the symbols found on

the mantel beam, the burn marks were probably applied for the purpose of barring entry to any harmful elements or spirits.

Two British researchers correctly point out that the majority of burn marks are in a vertical position. They believe these were done by the occupants after the building was completed, mainly during the seventeenth century. Many of these were scratched into to remove the burnt crust after approximately fifteen minutes of burning, so that they could be made deeper.<sup>52</sup> However, I believe that many burn marks, such as those found on church doors, were made in the late medieval period by craftsmen before or during assembly. Seeing such marks could have encouraged later tradesmen, and subsequently householders, to apply similar marks in times of stress or celebration, or for general protection. A multiplicity of burn marks in certain house locations could indicate that both owners and tradesmen were involved.

There are some burn marks that are not in the expected vertical position. For instance, a horizontal burn mark was found on a lintel at Great Barton.<sup>53</sup> The placement of slanting multi-burns on two studs on either side of a former gable chimney in Upton-upon-Severn, Worcestershire, reinforces the idea of attempting to prevent misfortune.<sup>54</sup> It seems likely that these angled marks were added before assembly, with each timber being held in an inclined forward position. One of the two studs also has the 'bulb' of each flame mark at the upper level and not at the lower part of each burn, which indicates that this stud has been deliberately reversed during assembly. The workman who marked each timber held the top end with his left hand and inclined it forward and to his left, perhaps by 45° while marking it with a candle held in his right hand. When assembling on site he then reversed this stud so that the angled flame marks were upside down and went away from the former chimney space to 'balance' the patterns on the left hand stud. Windows and doors were perhaps the most likely apertures to be marked after the hearths, not only with burn marks, but also with scribed and painted symbols (Photograph 3.A5).

During the gathering of evidence about the multitude of deliberately burnt marks on early church doors several observations were made. First, some marking was done with just a single or overlapping deep burn, usually placed centrally above eye level. Multiple burns are seen spread out, but are were usually in the upper zone of the door. Some were so lightly done that they could be missed unless one was determined to find them. These could be no more than a burn to the lower or upper angle of a door ledge, so were almost invisible, but the applier knew his job was done. Indeed some are angled or upside down, which means they could only be made while the door was off the pintles, perhaps even before it was first hung. It is most noticeable that many burn marks were applied to the planks, but so close to the medieval ledges or locks, which were not touched by fire, that these burn marks must be contemporary with the door, and so are much

older than the suspected date range for those inside houses, which are more frequently of sixteenth- or seventeenth-century origin.<sup>55</sup>

The burn marks could be applied to any part of a house, and are frequently noted at levels so close to the floor or to a stair tread that it is highly unlikely that they occurred accidentally. It seems far more likely that they were so placed to 'guard' some valued items stored nearby. On one of the bottom treads of the 1620 service stair at Bedfield Hall there is a candle burn on a riser, which is marked at such an odd angle that a cross draught is very unlikely to be the reason. It is on this same staircase, but at the upper level, that the wooden heart previously described has been inserted. It is on similar stairs that one sometimes finds scribed marks. Examples of these are in Ulveston Hall and Flemings Hall. The carved symbols on newel posts at Flemings Hall and Torrington Hall indicate a general fear of transitory spirits moving up and down these zones.

Sometimes the neat placement of a single or overlapping burn mark centrally on a mantel beam, as in 42 Double Street, Framlingham; above the door of an eighteenth-century school room in Viscri Church, Transylvania;<sup>56</sup> on a church door at Kedington, or on a bedhead<sup>57</sup> stands out as being purposeful in its intent, more so than the more common multiple burns spread across an area. When placed centrally, but at 90° on the mantel beam at Great Barton, almost certainly by the carpenter, the intention is obvious.<sup>58</sup>

### **The evidence for applied paper inscriptions or prints**

It became popular to apply biblical texts and homilies around the walls of some rooms in houses during the second half of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century. To Puritans these would have been daily reminders to pray and to live in a godly manner. What do not survive so often are texts on paper or pictorial images, pasted up in strategic positions to protect a hearth or doorway.

In the small market town of Debenham there are two surviving examples of these. Over the hall hearth of Camp Green Farm is a fragment from an exercise given to a younger student by a skilled hand. The teacher has written out a passage from the Geneva Bible for the younger hand to copy several times below it: this is done in neat rows. The passage from which the surviving fragment is taken reads: 'And moreover, I have seene under the Sun the place of judgement, where was wickednesse, and the place of justice, where was inquitie'. The mantel beam to which this was pasted is dated 1592 by inscripture, and in the early seventeenth century all the other wooden beams of the room, including this beam, were painted with grey distemper. The painter has carefully worked around this small sheet, including cutting into the area of wood that became exposed by the loss of a piece of paper from one corner. In other words, the text remained in place

for perhaps some months or years, and when decoration was applied this text was valued for its content rather than as a sentimental reminder of a child's schooling.

At another house in the same town is a printed text from a similar date. It is pasted over the mantel beam of 52 High Street. A third seventeenth-century printed text from Psalms 129: 3–4 and the first word of verse 5 (wicked) was found over the mantel beam in the village of Rose Cottage, Elmswell, Suffolk. Unusually, this is from a Hebrew prayer book and the heading at the top right is 'Shabbat': it is a reading for a *sabbath mincha* (afternoon) service in winter. What is common to all three biblical texts is the word 'Wickedness' or 'Wicked'.

The 'ghost' of a larger fourth example in Debenham, at No 1 Gracechurch Street, was applied to the plastered panel of a doorway that was blocked off about 1600. A decorative paint scheme of that date has gone around an area where a larger piece of paper was pasted on the plaster. Whereas the other two examples were textual, this larger missing space may have been a printed image. Before the Reformation an image that included the Virgin Mary may have been favoured, but in the Puritan period a religious image would only have been acceptable if it did not hint at idolatry, perhaps using an episode from the life of Jesus.<sup>59</sup> Some of the contemporary texts painted around this room are homilies and biblical quotes.

Other 'ghosts' of paper formerly pasted onto walls and ceilings have been found above an upper hearth at Walnut Tree Manor, Haughley, where a painter using red squiggles with terminal dots has tried to imitate a scheme of candle marks: the central area is oblong in shape and empty. On one corner of the candle-marked ceiling in 'The Timbers', The Street, Woolpit, four of the most significant markings stop short of a respected area of the ceiling that is now empty (see Figure 12.3 in chapter 12).<sup>60</sup> Both these blank areas are of a size to suggest that an appropriate godly print would have been pasted and displayed. Although the last three examples may have had the paintwork deliberately applied all over the paper ignoring the image, which was later pulled off, the care with which the previous three examples had been treasured makes this suggestion unlikely. In the Haughley case the squiggles clearly stop short, respecting the now empty zone.

In view of these locations, above hearths, over a blocked door, in the corner of a significant ceiling and in two cases associated with the visual repertoire of a specialist, it seems likely these 'messages' on paper were all attempting to give protection to the seventeenth-century inhabitants of these dwellings. In the case of the chimney texts this may result from concern about the risk of accidental fire. Although there may not be an English equivalent, there is a text carved into a seventeenth-century chimney beam from the Mayor's House in Aarhus, Denmark, that clearly shows the concerns of most families using an open hearth. The inscription roughly translates as, 'In

Jesu's name we kindle our fire. But Jesus let her burn no higher. Month of March 1673'. Similarly, an inscription painted below a painted eye, over a door in a village near Bolzano, Italy, has 'Pray for us holy Florian, that fire may not harm our building'.<sup>61</sup>

### Other locations: barns, neathouses and stables

There were many ways in which owners and workers could attempt to avert *maleficium* (evil-doing) to the animals and crops in barns and stables. Herbs and branches could be hung or planted around doors, horseshoes nailed up, warnings using dead predatory animals nailed or hung on or around the door, pieces of burnt wood or hag stones put on or hung over the animal stalls, symbols scribed into the ground at the entrance, or plants of *sempervivum* (house-leek) placed on the roof to avert lightning strikes. The loss of livestock or crops by fire or disease could mean financial ruin for farmers, so it was important to them that they tried any possible remedy to prevent misfortune.

It appears that when it became more common to line out walls and ceilings in plaster, particularly in barns from the second half of the eighteenth century, the tradesmen responsible often added circular patterns using dividers. Although the most recognisable symbols are the hexafoil and variants with three, four ('consecration mark') and 12 arcs, all manner of variations from part-circles to multiple circles seem to have become the standard repertoire. While recording these in the 1970s I was sometimes told by farm-workers that they believed they were done by their forebears with pitchforks on a wet day. There are too many different sizes of circles for this to be possible, and sometimes there are hundreds of arcs and circles placed in different zones of a building.<sup>62</sup>

The circular patterns were applied close to the areas where cattle were housed, against windows and around the wagon porches to barns. In stables they can be found in the tack room or around the upper walls where the hay was kept above the stalls for the horses. There was a widespread belief that horses that suffered from nightmares and were found sweating in the morning had been hag-ridden during the night.<sup>63</sup>

Most external doors to stables and barns were heavily used and have been replaced, so the evidence for marking them is mostly absent, but the more expensive internal doors to aristocratic stables and riding schools carry some evidence of having been marked with circles. Beneath thick layers of paint, several internal stable doors at Houghton Hall in Norfolk are marked with double circles and multifoils, as is the main internal door into the Riding House at Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire. At a more humble level, a late-nineteenth-century external pine door into a cow pen at Green Farm, Laxfield, has multiple circles inscribed on one of the planks, and a ledge at 90°. Another external mid-nineteenth-century door on a former

calf rearing shed nearby at Michaelmas Barn, Laxfield, is covered internally with circular symbols.<sup>64</sup>

Establishing a date range for circular patterns on plaster, stone and brick, is more problematic than for those found on timber. This often has to be gauged from the time of a barn's upgrading. In the corn-growing parts of Suffolk there was a wholesale need to re-structure and enlarge barns in the Napoleonic wars when extra grain had to be stored; this is a particular time when new plaster was introduced and circles were added. In stables, plaster was used from the seventeenth century onwards, so eighteenth-century scribed examples are more common. The upper walls of the early seventeenth-century stable at Cranley Hall, Eye, were re-plastered during an eighteenth-century improvement, and by chance a broken panel with an inscribed date and possible name was recovered from the floor where it had fallen. This completion date was 9 March 1774.<sup>65</sup>

### **Regional survival and the borrowing of symbols and methods**

The symbols that have been explained are those that can be frequently found in different parts of Britain. Many can be demonstrated to have been produced by various trades: rase knife symbols, for example, by carpenters. The density and similarity of marks vary greatly, even from one part of a county to another, suggesting that symbols used in one area were 'borrowed' by the next. Two areas of Suffolk are a clear indication of this: while there is a high number of well-marked hearth beams in Mid Suffolk, there is a comparative paucity in the area around Bury St Edmunds in the west of the county. Other tradesmen who developed or adopted apotropaic symbols were the plasterers, who used circular patterns based around the hexafoil and the 'consecration mark'. These seem to be most commonly applied after the mid eighteenth century, whilst the carpenters used them from at least the late sixteenth century onwards. Blacksmiths continued to use the X crosses on metalwork into the twentieth century. Ironmasters, particularly in south-east England, used the 'Marian' letters, X forms and vertical crosses on late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century firebacks, perhaps as fire prevention around hearths, in addition to the other methods discussed.<sup>66</sup> Certain symbols, such as the 'consecration mark', were used by bell founders on bronze cooking vessels. With these trades in mind, it is likely that anyone fashioning timber into household objects, or potters making vessels, adopted their own choice of apotropaic markings when they perceived the need. Joiners used symbols on chests and smaller furniture, sometimes worked into more elaborate designs. In addition owners sometimes added their own marks to their possessions.

It is possible that all these trades added their apotropaic markings as an extra service, knowing where these were to be placed within buildings, but there is an area associated with the craftsmen which might throw some light

on these practices: some hearth beams and occasionally doors are dense with symbolism, and the rase knife marks can be seen to have been made while the timber was still soft. Integrated with these are much lighter lines, arcs and circles made with the finer points of compass, scratch awl or knife. In certain examples these are more difficult to prove to be contemporary, but in some examples it seems that all the marks were made at the same time. A seventeenth-century door from a dairy, formerly inside Hulver Tree Farmhouse, Laxfield, has these two-layered markings on the two planks.<sup>67</sup> In this case the planks used to make the door had been seasoned before assembly and the rase knife grooves had been deflected by the grain from their true path. Not so the lighter straight lines and compass-made circles. With a compass there is more control, and little difference can be detected between such lighter marks scribed on new or seasoned wood. None of the marks crosses from one plank to the other, which almost certainly means that the boards were marked individually before assembly. The very numerous finer lines are so lightly done that it is only with a strong raking light that they can be made out. So the carpenter has spent some considerable extra time elaborating the plank markings where the client was unlikely ever to see them. The same can be said for many hearth beams with dual markings. The question is, why did the carpenter spend much more time than seems necessary putting hundreds of marks on a beam, when one well-placed central large M might have been acceptable? A clear example of a single large M doing its job in this way is at Crow's Hall, Debenham, on a large chimney beam over the hearth, probably used for brewing, in the range of buildings of the outer court.<sup>68</sup> This same range of buildings best illustrates the hundreds of arcs applied by plasterers around 1810 to the ceilings and walls above the cattle stalls and storage areas. What might seem to be overkill at Crow's Hall is found elsewhere, and not only in Britain, for an ecclesiastical building at the Chapel de Moullins, St-Rémy-du-Val, France, which was converted for agricultural purposes during the late eighteenth century, also has its plastered walls covered with circular patterns.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, in both cases just one plain circle is selected for a later hand to add a freehand X cross form inside.

Although the candle-marked late seventeenth-century ceilings were probably made by specialists rather than by craftsmen (as will be discussed later), a similar question arises. At Ulveston Hall near Debenham the hall ceiling above the ground floor is sparsely marked with just two Ms and a gridiron, while the hall chamber above is covered with symbols. In two other Suffolk houses, Boundary Farm at Framsdon and the upper gentry house, Nowton Hall, near Bury St Edmunds, there are ceilings on upper floors with only a few well-chosen symbols applied. These could have been sufficient, but the majority of other sites have ceilings covered with black graffiti. In the latter examples the magician would have had his own reasons for distributing well-placed symbols over a large area, but would

also have known that the effort he made and the finished result would be appreciated by his clients.

Marking the lintels would have involved a significant amount of extra time. Apparently it was not done so that the owner would notice and give extra rewards, but as a necessary part of a personal ritual when taking on a practical contract. It is clear that clients and craftsmen believed in the efficacy of such markings and took this work to be a necessary requirement for a new building. The owners could also have added their own marks to vulnerable parts of buildings when some misfortune seemed imminent, or when there was a run of bad luck. It is remarkable that there is no contemporary surviving record by such commentators as John Aubrey, who was curious about people's beliefs in protective measures. There is just a hint by the Suffolk author Allan Jobson who, writing about the old people in the village of Middleton in the first half of the twentieth century, said that they were 'forever taking avoiding actions against possible and portending evil'; 'why the menfolk nailed up a horse-shoe over the cow-house, and drew mysterious lines, crosses and triangles in the dust before the door'.<sup>70</sup> The mysterious lines, crosses and triangles all appear with regularity on house beams, particularly around hearths, but usually they were not made with a rasp knife. This observation could explain the additional scratched symbols put next to the compass-controlled circles in barns, such as the examples in the Crow's Hall wagon porch.<sup>71</sup>

## **Conclusion**

As with so many surviving rituals still performed by traditional agrarian societies, measures for protection around gables, doors and windows, are now mostly lost in England. The exception is the ubiquitous horseshoe nailed over the door. The temporary herbs, branches, painted and inlaid thresholds have now largely gone. Nevertheless, there is still a remarkable amount left to be recorded. Apart from the specific common symbols explored in this chapter and some recognisable types that crop up within certain districts, there are many others which are less easy to classify, or which defy easy explanation. Some of the latter are because these are relatively formless, lightly made, or are multi-linear markings. Without the proximity of those that are clearly apotropaic, there has sometimes been a willingness for these undistinguished marks to be claimed in this category. Some of these may be, but can't at present be proved. Those that are not clearly identifiable may be localised within a district and could be classified by local study. Future classifications of all potential apotropaic markings and symbols within other counties would be most worthwhile, even if it meant recording a relative paucity of marks in some regions. Only by building up a network of evidence for the use of symbols and artefacts in houses around the country will a clearer picture emerge of this practice, which was largely craft-led, but which was also copied with less skill by

observant householders. Other locations like caves, holy wells and engraved boulders and stones in the landscape are proving to have been so marked during later centuries. Similarly, common apotropaic markings have been found on furniture, household objects, pottery and the covers of a ship's cannon. Finally, as has been explained, perceived danger zones in buildings could have been marked for a wide range of reasons, so the misleading name for multifoils of 'daisywheels' and lazy terms like 'witch marks' would be better abandoned altogether. There is no way of definitely knowing what they were called, so a more neutral term puts them into a more objective category for further study.

## Notes

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53. Easton, 'Burning Issues', 44, bottom two figures.
54. 1–3 Court Street, Upton upon Severn, Worcestershire. Photographs and information supplied by Shona Robson-Glyde.
55. Dean and Hill, 'Burn Marks on Buildings', 10.
56. Easton, 'Burning Issues', 46, top figure.
57. Bedhead: collection of David Newton.
58. Easton, 'Burning Issues', 44, bottom two figures.
59. Tara Hamling, *Decorating the 'Godly' Household: Religious Art in Post-Reformation Britain* (New Haven and London, 2010), 61–3.
60. Easton, 'Candle Powers', 57.
61. Robert Lawrence, *The Magic of the Horse Shoe with Other Folk-Lore Notes* (London, 1898), quoted in Davies, *Material Culture*, 401. St Florian was the patron saint of chimney sweeps and firefighters.
62. Easton, 'Protective Circular Symbols'.
63. John Aubrey, *Miscellanies Upon the Following Subjects Collected by J. Aubrey Esq.* (London, 1721), 147.
64. Easton, 'Portals of Protection', 55, figures 6a and 6b.
65. Easton, 'Protective Circular Symbols'.
66. Easton, 'Apotropaic Symbols on Cast-Iron Firebacks', 14–33.
67. Ayres, *Domestic Interiors*, 62, figure 99.
68. Easton, 'Plumbing a Spiritual World', 43, figure 5.
69. Easton, 'Protective Circular Symbols'.
70. Allan Jobson, *A Window in Suffolk* (London, 1962), 61.
71. Easton, 'Protective Circular Symbols'.

# 4

## Instances and Contexts of the Head Motif in Britain

*John Billingsley*

The human head has proved to be an enduring symbol, employed over several millennia in a variety of contexts suggestive of a more or less consistent association of meanings. Repeated appearances as skull or sculptured artefact through prehistory indicate a ritualised application of the head as symbol, as does a frequent recurrence at locations which may be seen as boundaries or thresholds, whether of a physical or metaphysical nature. Prehistoric artwork from a wide variety of cultures also implies a perception of the human head over and above a design element, extending to a degree of purposive application. Further appearances in the historical record to the present day, as skull or artefact, in narrative or artwork, tend to echo earlier manifestations.

The argument, however, is not one of continuity. Instances where the head as symbol has been employed, for all their similarity, vary spatially, typologically and chronologically. The head motif, as I shall term it here, is not a thread running through history, but rather a skein of threads, some of which have frayed and broken, imparting as they do so a different texture to the whole. The dynamic appears to be one of recurrence, akin to stitching – the thread of association remaining present in human consciousness, and apparently prone to emerge into visibility periodically, in different places.

Although the motif has hitherto been discussed largely within an archaeological frame of reference, this only addresses a part of the wider story, and specifically that part which is the least articulate. If a particular valorisation of the human head is visible in and across human cultures, it comes without explicit message – the symbol was employed in specific contexts with the assumption that those present at the time would be aware of its intended meaning. Its persistence and variety of manifestations demand closer investigation into the meaning or meanings carried by the motif, and equally demand a multi-disciplinary approach comprising elements of archaeology, ethnography, folkloristics and art studies. I argue here that the head motif should be addressed through the broad prism of cultural tradition; I further aim to assess the motif as an amalgamation and composite

of its manifestations, and to place its appearance in Christian Britain in a wider inherited context of traditions connected with folk magic, protection and conceptions of a dimension that for convenience I refer to as the 'otherworld'.

### The head motif in ritual

This is not the place to discuss in detail the plentiful archaeological evidence for the special treatment of the human head or surrogate artefacts. The practice is clear throughout archaeological literature, but the meaning is, inevitably, less so. Nonetheless, allusions are set up within prehistoric and other cultural contexts which are necessary to a consideration of the motif's later development.

The ubiquity of the human head in archaeological contexts has led some researchers to suggest a *prima facie* religious significance.<sup>1</sup> E. O. James in 1957, for instance, referred to the 'cult of skulls' that seemed evident across prehistoric religion from at least the Palaeolithic period onwards; this was echoed a decade later by Anne Ross, more specifically for Iron Age Britain, but building on theory first constructed for 'Celtic' Europe by French archaeologists.<sup>2</sup> In the *La Tene* style of European Late Iron Age art, heads are 'ubiquitous', and 'Celtic' art in general strongly favoured the head motif.<sup>3</sup> Even on the rare occasions when the human figure is depicted, the head is overstated, emphasising its meaningful nature. Frequently, the face is schematic and reductive, but at the other end of the scale the face is hinted at ultra-stylistically within the overall design in an ambiguous *trompe l'oeil* fashion – now you see it, now you don't;<sup>4</sup> either way, a quasi-lifelike representation is avoided. Today, however, the 'cult of the head' as put forward by Ross is considered for various reasons to have been overstated, although as Harding says, it 'nevertheless has some basis in the archaeological and documentary record'<sup>5</sup> that supports the supposition that the underlying ritualisation apparent in archaeological retrievals implies a religious meaning.

That may well be so. The ubiquity, however, includes different contexts that are susceptible to different theoretical interpretations. Ritual decapitation may, for instance, be connected with extraction of the brain for cannibalistic purposes; or consuming the brain may have been thought to internalise the essence of the deceased or their memory as an ancestor – or to perform an ultimate act of humiliation of an enemy. The fashioning of brain pans into 'skull cups' may be an opportunistic piece of recycling held to be appropriate for certain forms of food, like human meat or blood – or to confer a social or esoteric significance on whatever is served in such a vessel.<sup>6</sup> Decapitation could implicitly honour a person, by deeming their head to contain an essence of value to the new owner – or disrespect them through a definitive depersonalisation. Decapitation in warfare may be trophy-hunting, tally-counting, political propaganda – or may appropriate

the enemy's vitality, deprive them of proper burial rites, hinder their progress in the afterlife, or incorporate them into the victor's community. The depiction of faces within swirling Iron Age decoration may be an obsessive focus on a conventional design element – or the purposive incorporation of a talismanic motif. There are indications of such variant potential meanings throughout the archaeological and ethnographic evidence. Whatever the particular meaning ascribed to a deliberate separation of the head (physically or graphically), it constitutes a ritual act, though not necessarily of an overtly magico-religious nature.

Ritual is an aspect of human societies and involves a customary application of procedures that may be religious, magical, social or initiatory, and quite possibly all of these simultaneously.<sup>7</sup> To opt for one explanation over another may well be simplistic. Any action embodying the head motif may have had multiple meanings – a warrior's severed head may be trophy, propaganda, incorporation *and* absorption of the hero's qualities, fulfilling both secular and magical roles.<sup>8</sup> The treatment of the Roman general Postumius' head, recorded by Livy, is an example; after he fell in battle with the Boii tribe in northern Italy in 216 CE, his head was cut off, prepared and gilded as a skull-cup, and presented to the tribal shrine as a sacred vessel.<sup>9</sup> This sequence of acts incorporates several of the ritual meanings suggested above, and functions across a spectrum linking warfare with religion.

The act of decapitation should therefore only be seen as a constituent, albeit *sine qua non*, component of the head motif. This stage of the process is the least recoverable in terms of information – archaeologists can establish whether a head was decapitated from the front or back, at death or some time after, or whether the flesh disappeared naturally or by defleshing, etc., but this says little of the meaning, intent or context of such decapitation. Similarly, the special treatment of a head or face image in artwork will imply, but not divulge, meaning. To acquire a clearer idea of function, there must be a further purposive element or elements. One such element is the deliberate placement of the severed head or its image – i.e. the construction of a context.

A note is needed here, in advance of fuller discussion below, to clarify terminology regarding the typology of carved heads. Initially, a basic distinction needs to be recognised between on the one hand realistic and lifelike heads, and on the other stylised heads. This chapter is especially concerned with the latter, and more specifically focuses on a simple sub-variant known as the archaic head, a term which denotes a minimalist template of human features, frequently consisting of little more than eyes, nose and mouth.<sup>10</sup>

From prehistory into the modern era, from myth into folk tale and custom, the head motif shows remarkable consistency in terms of the places where it is encountered, and it is location rather than any other element that reveals a role for the motif within the broad remit of magical activity. Even if the intensity of application of the motif shows a declining trajectory

from prehistory, in particular the Iron Age, to the present, the human head as symbol manifests a persistence that identifies it as an enduring element of folk culture and tradition – it is a dynamic and recurring phenomenon that cannot yet be consigned to the past.

It is therefore through location and application, rather than chronology, that I intend to address this topic. Something that will become increasingly familiar in this chapter is a persistent connection with thresholds, which may be understood in a physical or a metaphysical sense (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive within a magical schema). From a metaphysical perspective, death is clearly liminal, representing the bridge between this world and the next, and thus any means by which the otherworld may be accessed becomes liminal; whereas from a more mundane perspective, gateways and other marks of a transition between types of physical space similarly represent a potential for liminal experience.

### Funerary tradition

Funerary application is one such context. Scattered evidence from Palaeolithic and Mesolithic sites suggests the presence of the motif in funerary ritual,<sup>11</sup> but it is in the Neolithic that things become more coherent. The preference of the skull and long bones for mortuary and post-mortuary ritual is apparent from either their preponderance or absence among partial inhumations of the Neolithic period.<sup>12</sup> From Bronze Age cairns come both skulls and sculpted heads, while in the Iron Age skull burial is found particularly at certain hillforts, with indications of gender separation in final location; skull burial at settlement sites increases in the later Iron Age.<sup>13</sup> Wait further notes an echo of Neolithic practice in the preference of long bones as well as skulls in partial inhumation (recalled in the familiar ‘skull and crossbones’ death symbol of recent centuries), and comments that partial inhumations ‘may perhaps represent not a mortuary ritual *per se*, but deposits following other, possibly sacrificial, propitiatory or apotropaic rituals’.<sup>14</sup>

These kinds of funerary rites understandably decrease in the Roman period, but a class of decapitation burial – where heads are removed and placed beside the body, generally around the legs and feet – constitutes around 2.5 per cent of Roman burials in the UK.<sup>15</sup> The meaning of this usually post-mortem rite is unclear, but may have been that decapitation deterred a potentially resentful spirit from ‘walking’ and/or prevented their access to the proper afterlife, consigning them to a separately conceived realm. If so, it may be inferred that such bodies had broken some social threshold or taboo.

Criminality was certainly associated with decapitated burials at Walkington Wold in East Yorkshire. Here the burials were at a Bronze Age barrow, but were Anglo-Saxon; the barrow had been re-used as an execution cemetery, reaffirming and augmenting its liminal status in the new

Christian context. Ten burials placed at the perimeter of the barrow were headless – their skulls were buried on the mound itself, some after prior display.<sup>16</sup> Later examples of decapitation and skull display of transgressors occur in the widespread practice of placing severed heads on spikes at civic locations such as city gates, as at Micklegate in York, and bridges, as at old London Bridge.

Though this tradition died out, Baring-Gould believed, with a certainty that we may not share nowadays, that elements of later architecture derived from this practice: ‘Skulls and decaying heads came to be so thoroughly regarded as a part, an integral ornament of a gate or gable, that when architects built renaissance houses and gateways, they set up stone balls on them as substitutes for the heads which were no longer available’.<sup>17</sup> Rites of capital punishment are unlikely to have applied in many cases where such features are found, but, as Baring-Gould also implies, the balls may have been a symbolic substitution for a well-known motif that passed over into customary decoration in other buildings.<sup>18</sup>

A further link with funerary practice may be suggested among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century heart gravestones of West Yorkshire. Hearts were inscribed on gravestones as a Christian symbol for the soul, and were at first shown as simple heart shapes. Over time, however, the symbol was elaborated upon in a development that recalls the trajectory of Iron Age *La Tene* art, vegetal scrolls embellishing the heart in such a way that a *trompe-l’oeil* image of a face is conjured within the design.<sup>19</sup> Whether coincidental or not, the association of this development with funerary practice, the soul and a liminal depiction of the human face ties in with discussions below.

## Head-hunting

The display of criminals’ heads may be viewed as a modern remnant of head-hunting, a widespread practice in prehistory and history. Head-hunting is defined by Armit as ‘a form of group-sanctioned, ritualised violence, in which the removal of the human head plays a central role’,<sup>20</sup> and begins to come more clearly into focus in the Iron Age, when commentators recorded the practice among non-classical tribes of Europe. The practice died hard – in Ireland in 1457, the Fermanagh chieftain Thomas og Maguire celebrated victory over the O’Rourkes by placing sixteen heads on stakes in his grounds, a practice echoed by the Englishman Sir Humphrey Gilbert in the subjugation of Ireland a century later.<sup>21</sup> The severed head as spectacle offers an intimidating display of enmity and prowess, even in today’s Middle East. Headhunting is known to have been practised from at least the Mesolithic period and was not confined to warriors.<sup>22</sup> It is known on all continents and has sometimes been associated with cannibalism; sometimes, consumption of the brain was considered to transfer the soul or essence to the consumer, while sometimes just the taking of the skull had

the same effect. In Europe, the practice survived in the Balkans until at least the late nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup>

In some cases, head-hunting offers an opportunity for regret and the incorporation of the enemy into a new community. In Timor, warriors would return with severed heads, to which offerings were made and dances and songs performed to lament their enmity and beg reconciliation. In Sarawak, a severed head was treated with kindness and respect, and fed tasty food items for several months; the deceased was implored to transfer his affections to his new community. These practices have parallels in Irish literature.<sup>24</sup> It is apparent that head-hunting can involve several layers of customary practice and belief, representing typical stages of a rite of passage – the conferment of a new status and reincorporation into a community with that new status; implicit is a conceptualisation of posthumous continuation of the deceased's existence and power to exert effects.

### **Health-giving skulls**

European tradition seems to imply that drinking from a skull fashioned into a vessel could bestow benefits and healing – the massive skull of Ulster's Conall Cernach would bestow strength to Ulstermen drinking from it,<sup>25</sup> while epileptics could also benefit from spring water supped from a slain man's skull, according to both Pliny in the first century CE and Reginald Scot in 1564, a practice which survived in the Highlands until the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> In Wales, drinking spring water from St Teilo's alleged skull was held to cure whooping cough in a rite that seems to have begun in the seventeenth century; a similar practice existed at Ffynnon Llandyfaen.<sup>27</sup>

### **Face-pots**

Another appearance of the motif is in pottery, and in this case the association with the motif appears to have particularly developed in Britain. There may be an ultimate association with skull-cups, but the function of the various face-pots through the centuries varies, as does the degree and type of stylisation of the face. Nonetheless, a ritual layer of meaning, within the broad spectrum already observed, seems apparent.

During the Roman period, two relevant types of pot appeared, the head-vase and the face-pot; the former depicted quasi-realistic faces, while the latter, themselves sub-divided on size to jars or beakers, were stylised and schematic and are usually associated with folk tradition carrying over from pre-Classical cultures across Europe.<sup>28</sup> Braithwaite shows a widespread use of stylised face-pots across Iron Age Europe beyond the accepted 'Celtic' areas.<sup>29</sup> In Britain by the fourth century CE, following Rome's lessening influence, face-pots developed an insular character with a wider variety of anthropomorphic pottery than the Continent. Most of this appears to

have been cult-related and increasingly pursues the archaic variant of the motif.<sup>30</sup>

A development suggesting that England particularly understood the head as a magical and apotropaic symbol occurred in the sixteenth century with Bartmann jugs, often known as bellarmines, that had been popular as mundane articles on the continent. On their arrival in England, many such jugs functioned as anti-witchcraft devices, as will be discussed later, and were deposited in the Thames and in ditches, as well as in houses. Bellarmines featured a bearded face at the base of the neck, which over time became more caricature-like, and it may well be wondered if it was the stylised face that commended them to their folk-magic role, which appears unique to England.<sup>31</sup> Braithwaite certainly sees an echo of the proto-historic face-pot in these jars, and remarks that in Britain 'what these bellarmine witch bottles do show is that even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries people still believed that a river, as well as burial in the ground, provided links with the supernatural and the world beyond, and that the bearded mask would better ensure that the offering or the message was received'.<sup>32</sup>

### **Emblems of power**

The display of severed heads, whether at or around one's home or on spikes at official locations, or even as skull-cups, constitutes a graphic demonstration of authority, but was obviously an extreme applied only in certain circumstances. Like the stone balls believed by Baring-Gould to be surrogate symbols of temporal power, certain artefacts conferred a legitimacy, imposed or inherited through office; among these may be included coins, which have generally borne a representation of the local power-broker's head.

We may also include sceptres such as the particularly fine example, decorated with eight archaic faces, found in the Anglo-Saxon ship burial at Sutton Hoo. It was also a whetstone, and a number of whetstones, usually bearing a single archaic face, have been found across Britain; Simpson equates them with a mythical episode in which a fragment of stone becomes embedded in Thor's head, causing mood changes which help to explain his capriciousness.<sup>33</sup> By extension, the whetstone came to represent the god and his power – whoever wielded the whetstone had a kind of hotline to the god, a notion that is intrinsic to the archaic belief in the 'divine right of kings'.

This concept may be notionally linked to the vigorous resurgence of the head motif in seventeenth-century Pennine vernacular architecture. Although this resurgence predated the Civil War, it was still active throughout the events leading up to and through the decapitation of Charles I and the restoration of Charles II. The head motif became a vehicle for expressing support for the king; usually this was semi-opaque, in that a traditional image familiar in other contexts was deployed to symbolise the

'old order' and the decapitated monarch, but explicit at East Riddlesden Hall (1642) near Keighley, where a traditional face is paired with the inscription 'Vive Le Roi'.<sup>34</sup> The motif also appears in mid seventeenth-century English slipware, in designs by Thomas Toft, William Taylor and others, depicting King Charles II hiding in the Boscobel Oak – though his father was the one who had been beheaded, the future king is represented by an exaggerated bodiless head in the tree.<sup>35</sup>

## Weaponry

Much of the discussion so far has involved death, so it is appropriate here to consider the appearance of the head motif on weaponry, a class of artefact that stands potentially at the threshold between life and death. The association of heads with weaponry is strong in the Iron Age, as one might expect, and appears on the hilts of swords and daggers and on shields. In the former, it manifests mostly as an exaggerated human head between the arms of the hilt, while in the latter, especially in later *La Tene* objects, the motif takes on a more stylised appearance familiar from other forms of metalwork such as drinking vessels and personal ornament.<sup>36</sup> In these weapons, the head motif may have symbolised life's threshold, but also clearly had a reassuring apotropaic function, a role which has been advanced for its appearance on articles of personal decoration.<sup>37</sup>

Like so much of the head motif, stylised faces on sword-hilts made a reappearance in Britain from about 1635–1670 among a type that came to be known in the nineteenth century as proto-mortuary and mortuary swords. Generally archaic in style, but with long hair, the faces resembled those appearing on vernacular architecture of the time, and by extension of the association described in the previous section became connected to the Stuart cause, despite their pre-revolutionary emergence and their use by both sides of the conflict.<sup>38</sup>

## Wells and water sites

Both skulls and surrogates such as stone heads and face-pots have featured in ritual activities at sites involving an interface with water. Springs, wells, bogs, ponds, lakes and rivers have consistently yielded evidence of votive or magical deposition from the Bronze Age onwards, particularly in the Iron Age, Romano-British and mediaeval periods.<sup>39</sup> As traditional deposition involves objects of value, and frequently metal, coins are appropriate, and possess an additional qualification in the form of the head.

Evidence for water as a portal to a supernatural dimension is clear in the number of shrines at such locations in late prehistory, extending into a close legendary association, particularly in the British Isles and Brittany, between Christian saints, decapitation and wells.<sup>40</sup> The perception of water as a

gateway to another world may be metaphorical, in that the phenomenon of parallax – in which the world on the other side of the water looks the same, but the alignment of objects placed in it is altered – implies a subtle shift in reality appropriate to a conceived otherworld. Thus, water becomes a conceptual threshold and thereby a location where magical potential exists.

The Roman Occupation yields much evidence of ritual deposition – skulls have been found in a pool at Wookey Hole cave in Somerset and Coventina's Well on Hadrian's Wall, while the latter has also received bronze heads and other votives.<sup>41</sup> Similar deposits have come from rivers, such as the Walbrook in London, and bogs.<sup>42</sup>

The placing of skulls or any animal remains in wells and springs would seem curious, as it effectively contaminates the water for consumption. Such practices, therefore, suggest that some sites were specifically selected for communication with the sacred realm (as at Coventina's Well), or that some wells were contaminated as an act of spite (as may be implied by stories of wells and other water sites becoming baleful),<sup>43</sup> or, as Merrifield suggests, that remains were deposited as a deliberate termination rite.<sup>44</sup> At later dates, the strong association of wells and heads continued in both practice and legend. Numerous saints from across Europe, and not only in the 'Celtic' countries, have developed narratives of wells springing from their severed heads – St Winifred's Well at Holywell in North Wales is a celebrated example, as are St Osyth in Essex and St Decuman in Somerset.<sup>45</sup>

When a severed head isn't involved, a carved head often carries on the association, as at the mediaeval Town Wells at Bodmin and the head of uncertain date at Ffynon Beuno (St Beuno's Well) at Tremeirchion. An older example may be a tricephalic head recovered near Glossop in Derbyshire; thought to be Romano-British in date, it is associated with a river junction.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps, where a skull from which to drink was unavailable, as in the healing customs above, it was thought that water emerging from the mouth of an archaic head could similarly acquire enhanced potential for benefit. Even in a secular setting, heads and wells seem natural companions, appearing at the eighteenth-century village well at Goodshawfold in Lancashire, the nineteenth-century heads at White Wells, Ilkley (which fed mineral spring waters into the public spa bath), and the 'Slavering Baby' at Adel in West Yorkshire (associated with a rural tea-room).<sup>47</sup>

## **Bridges**

Bridges are intuitively connected with water-sites, and also, along with fords, play a role in traditional narratives as otherworld portals, including being a means of passage to the afterlife.<sup>48</sup> This identifies them as liminal places, and as such they may appear in narratives as locations for combats or encounters with witches and supernatural entities. There are also numerous

legends of sacrifice, either at the foundation of a bridge or of the first living thing to cross a bridge. It is therefore not surprising to find the head motif at such locations.<sup>49</sup>

Bridges on which carved heads appear range from road bridges, such as the sixteenth-century Rawthey Bridge at Sedbergh, to aqueducts – the 1795 structure at Hebden Bridge carrying the Rochdale Canal over the dangerous confluence of a tributary with the River Calder echoes the location of the Glossop tricephalos.<sup>50</sup>

## Building thresholds

Customs regarding the placement of skulls at perimeters and gateways have been cited in the sections on funerary tradition and head-hunting. The burial of skulls at the perimeters of enclosures and fortresses sufficiently resembles the practice of displaying heads at entrances to houses and settlements (as at the Iron Age sites of Stanwick and Bredon) to indicate a component to display over and above *braggadocio*.<sup>51</sup> The apotropaic implication is affirmed by the later appearance of sculpted heads at thresholds of both buildings and enclosed spaces, mediaeval ecclesiastical imagery at roof edges particularly echoing apotropaic practice (such as the deployment of *gorgoneioni*) of the Roman period.<sup>52</sup>

All over the world, certain positions on buildings are given particular attention, typically those places where the enclosed space is interrupted. Such thresholds are points of metaphysical weakness, engendered by the fact of enclosure itself; certain undertakings required a kind of 'act of dialogue' with the *anima loci*.<sup>53</sup> Negotiation with these unseen forces was deemed necessary to sanction and consecrate the enclosure and counteract negative effects; such reasoning is implicit in the esoteric application of Chinese *feng-shui*. Some measures were matters of design, while others were more arcane and clearly have an occult nature, such as foundation sacrifice.

Such sacrifices in the historic period more typically involve animals such as cats and horses, but live human interment is alleged at Iona, where a monk, St Odhran, is said to have volunteered himself for the good of the monastery, and Holsworthy in Devon; and possibly at Darrington church in West Yorkshire, where a man's body was found laid a foot below the ground in such a position that the west wall of the twelfth-century tower rested on his skull.<sup>54</sup> Onomastic folklore relating to some carved heads in buildings explains them as commemorating a worker killed or someone who died during construction, and awareness of this kind of lore was encountered by David Clarke and myself during our fieldwork.<sup>55</sup> This may derive from a folk memory of foundation sacrifice, rather than an actual event, but the Rev. Baring-Gould believed that 'heads carved on towers may ... refer to a life sacrificed to secure the tower's stability', associating them also with stories of workers falling from towers.<sup>56</sup>

The most frequent locations for the head motif that we can see today are on buildings and their associated property, and because of the inevitably limited survival of wooden structures, most commonly on stone buildings. Typically, carved heads are placed at gateways, over doors, at windows (often on moulding terminals), in gable ends, at roof lines, and on chimneys and fireplaces. These locations clearly are counterparts to the placement practices of previous eras. Gateways, doors and windows are self-evident thresholds of the property; heads at eaves and gable mark out the perimeter. Chimneys also signify the potential for supernatural intrusion (as in the Father Christmas legend), and terracotta chimney-pots bearing archaic faces are also known from the mediaeval and early modern periods in England – a fourteenth-century example from Oxford, bearing the apotropaic form of the tongue-poker, can be seen in the Ashmolean Museum.<sup>57</sup>

Carved heads on secular buildings, exemplified in but not restricted to the seventeenth-century vernacular architecture of the South Pennines, are usually oriented to face outwards from the threshold, creating a discrete protected space.<sup>58</sup> Ecclesiastical heads, particularly from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries, have a greater range, appearing typically at windows, doorways and corbels externally, and internally also on pillar capitals and locations bordering the nave, including the chancel arch. A further difference between ecclesiastical and secular heads is the far greater incidence of fantastic stylisation in the former, as in grotesques like foliate heads and heads with animal features;<sup>59</sup> secular heads tend more towards the plain 'archaic' style (this division implies that the archaic head is closer to folk tradition, while stylisation, though fed by the same tradition, has a more esoteric aspect). The heyday of the head motif on churches and cathedrals was mediaeval, but the symbol re-emerged strongly in the nineteenth century with the nostalgic but equally contextual and effective revivals of the Romanesque and Gothic styles. Another resurgence of architectural heads, mostly in secular buildings, was apparent towards the end of the twentieth century.<sup>60</sup>

It should be noted that the above locations echo other domestic apotropaic devices, such as horseshoes, spirals, holed stones and witch bottles; on South Pennine vernacular buildings, these locations are shared with other protective symbols such as those discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>61</sup> This places the head motif in a context of vernacular magical practice, which is well supported by the frequency of popular belief that a carved head of 'archaic' typology will protect the building from misfortune.<sup>62</sup> Perimeter heads can also appear on stone troughing ends, in which position they resemble the gargoyles of mediaeval ecclesiastical buildings, which themselves call to mind the well-heads where water issues from the mouth.

A prototype for gable heads lies in Roman antefixa, triangular ceramic tiles placed at the apex of gables as apotropaic devices. They frequently depicted faces; a good collection is on display at Caerleon, South Wales.

Like the other threshold locations mentioned above, the gable is also known for talismanic devices in other cultures – the Chinese characters for fire and water (signifying deterrence rather than invitation) in Japan, for instance, while Viking houses might feature the diagonal cross or *dag* rune, or the similar *gifu*, as a marking for good fortune, symbols also sometimes seen in the Pennines and East Anglia.<sup>63</sup> Heads on domestic chimneys and fireplaces may be the stimulus for those on industrial chimneys in West Yorkshire, such as at Keighley and Birstalls. These heads have been locally attributed to workers killed during construction or to people associated with their construction, but their frequent lack of realism argues against such portraiture.<sup>64</sup> Two remarkable pillar-heads, probably from the nineteenth century and now at the Touchstones Gallery, Rochdale, call to mind the wayside herms of ancient Greece, albeit without the erect phallus of the Greek prototype. Herms, sacred to the psychopomp deity Hermes, were short pillars topped by a carved head, placed as waymarkers and boundary posts; Hermes (and his Roman counterpart, Mercury) was a deity closely associated with the head motif and also with communications with the otherworld.

Helpfully, doorway heads of the seventeenth century onwards frequently appear on datestones, helping to establish the vibrancy of the motif around that time – indeed, the 1600s represent the peak of the motif in a folk-traditional context. Heads at gateways also on occasion feature a date, and of course church architecture is also dateable. By evidence such as this, it is possible to identify three major peaks in the dynamic of the head motif in Christian Britain – the late Middle Ages, the seventeenth century, and the nineteenth.<sup>65</sup> By the nineteenth, the makers of such heads were becoming less anonymous, and some Yorkshire carvers have been identified;<sup>66</sup> Brears adds: 'It appears to be far more than coincidence that the carvers working in northern England during the past 300 years should have placed their stone heads almost solely in situations which have such a long and well-established ritual significance'.<sup>67</sup>

We might also include here the various 'screaming skulls' known from around the country, but particularly from Lancashire, Cumbria and the Peak District. These are skulls which derive from uncertain and frequently legendary origins, but which for some reason have become inextricably linked with a certain building – inextricable, in that their removal is held to trigger misfortunes and uncanny happenings. While the heads would rarely appear to be truly ancestral, a hereditary element is implicit, identifying them as *ipso facto* place guardians, and the nature of the phenomena linked with them – including spontaneous return to their favoured location, retribution for maltreatment and disquieting sounds – establishes a firm set of supernatural credentials. The legends associated with them also fall into a class of motifs associated with skulls that must not be moved or which move under their own mysterious propulsion.<sup>68</sup> These guardian skulls, whose function Clarke believes to parallel that of the archaic stone head, dramatically and

jealously underline the traditional association between the head motif and place protection, and demand 'right action' from their keepers in exchange for their protection.

## Typology

It was examples from such historical resurgences that brought the head motif to prominence in antiquarian circles in the late 1960s, spearheaded by Sidney Jackson, Keeper of Cartwright Hall Museum in Bradford. Jackson's interest had been piqued by a number of carved stone heads brought in for appraisal, which were generally fairly minimalist in style and undateable. At first lacking an academic framework in which they could be placed, that changed with the publication of Anne Ross's *Pagan Celtic Britain* in 1968, which illustrated a number of similar heads and placed them in a context of a hypothetical Celtic cult of the head; thus was born the term 'Celtic head'. The search for hitherto-unsuspected treasures of a pagan past was on, and the quest excited the imaginations of antiquarians everywhere. Within five years, however, serious questions were being asked about these Celtic heads – specifically, about how many could be reliably dated to the Iron Age or Romano-British period – and these questions extended to some of those in Ross' book and in museum displays. Jackson's death in 1973, by which time he too was accepting that a significant number of his 'Celtic' heads were not Celtic after all (his 1973 booklet, tellingly entitled *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*, acknowledged this), removed the heads' principal advocate.<sup>69</sup> Through the 1970s and 1980s the stone heads retreated back into the shadows, leaving nevertheless a somewhat wishful assumption among many local historians that their archaic stone heads were ancient survivals. So what was (and remains for some) the 'Celtic head'? There was no defining style, but certain typical characteristics could be noted – the face was oval or pear-shaped, usually flat or of low relief. Round or almond-shaped eyes were separated by a continuous line delineating strong brows and a wedge-shaped nose. The mouth was oval or sometimes little more than a slit. Other features, such as ears, nose, or hair on face or head, were optional.

There were two major problems. One was that while faces akin to this minimalist template could certainly be found in a prehistoric or proto-historic context, there were a larger number that were clearly far more recent, and several of these were integral to datestones from recent centuries. The other was that it was difficult to identify a discrete 'Celtic style', given so many variations. There were therefore at least two good reasons to reject the 'Celtic' descriptor for these simple stone heads; a third reason was that 'Celtic' was positively misleading, in that it designated a specific archaeological niche on artefacts whose provenance and inspiration spanned a far greater range across eras and cultures. Once a stone head could be shown not to be Celtic, it fell into an academic vacuum; and in the 1990s I employed

the term 'archaic head' as better able to refer to the basic minimalist facial treatment and to replace the clearly erroneous 'Celtic head'.<sup>70</sup> It also allowed these objects to be seen in a wider context that offers more understanding of their role – in particular in a pattern of cultural tradition bridging religious activity, myth and folklore that seemingly refuses to become entirely archaeological. The archaic head, in other words, is a vigorous part of an ongoing folk motif active within the remit of folk magic.

While these heads have no hard-and-fast style, there is one defining characteristic which is something of a negative definition – a steadfast rejection of naturalistic portraiture. The archaic head is a variety of stylisation that pares the human head down to its essential components – though recognisably human, it is not an ideal, nor the face of someone living in this world. Other, more fantastic, stylised faces, such as those seen in church grotesques, exaggerate the otherness of the visage; they share this otherworldliness as well as location with the archaic head. It is as if depicting a face that could be from this world detracts from the purpose, as the two faces on the porch of Wood Lane Hall in Sowerby, West Yorkshire, suggest – a quasi-portrait head on the 1649-dated lintel is offset barely two feet above by a typically crude archaic head.<sup>71</sup> A portrait head, it seems to say, is too real, too hubristic – if you want a head to keep malign forces at bay, a 'no-frills' version is your answer, a message that is underlined in a wooden beam in nearby Wainstalls that includes an archaic face in an array of other protective devices ranging from the sacred monogram of Jesus to diagonal crosses and spirals.<sup>72</sup> A carving may be competent, even skilful, or unskilled, but however it appears it is rarely a vehicle of pleasing ornament – its function is different. Threshold locations, folklore and typologies combine across the range of the archaic head's appearances to affirm its place within a repertoire of latter-day protective symbols in the British Isles: prehistoric precursors of the image display the same liminal features and provide a framework of probable conceptualisation.

This typology helps underline the key components of the motif as discussed above regarding location. The archaic head rejects portraiture, denies the face of this world; it is a face losing its physical individuation. Likewise, it avoids the skeletal – it is not yet devoid of all character. It remains on the fringe of human likeness. This image of the face pauses the process between the living portrait and the decay into death and the skull.<sup>73</sup> Not only is it located on a this-world threshold, it is also liminal in its typology. It is, too, Platonic, in that by depicting a recognisable human face that is yet not recognisable as an individual, it becomes 'form', and can refer to those on either side of the metaphysical threshold.

The combined matrix of the eyes within the T-frame of the brows and nose is arguably what gives the archaic head a compelling gaze, and thereby its immediacy and power – the 'stony gaze', as I have called it. This establishes an association with the repertoire of images associated with beliefs

about the 'evil eye'. In the archaic head, the face disarticulates, like that of the Cheshire Cat – but unlike Carroll's cat, it is not the grin that stays with us, but the eyes. This is particularly well illustrated in the minimalist 'notch head', generally found on external corbels, which consists of little more than a relief T – but with interplay of light and shadow, eyes seem to emerge and withdraw. In a similar but more literal way, the typology of more stylised examples is also liminal, in that they too are set at a threshold, and turning away from human likeness – perhaps into an apotropaic gesture such as poking the tongue (or, where the whole body is shown, displaying private parts), in transition from humanity to vegetation as in foliate heads, or shapeshifting into animal form (cat ears is a frequent development).<sup>74</sup>

### **God-heads?**

The primary vehicle for the head motif in the historic period and a powerful dynamic of its prehistoric appearance would seem, from the preceding discussion, to be folkloric and relatively local, i.e. not part of a specific religious credo. Ross' hypothesis of a head cult has been rejected as an over-formalisation of the evidence, and I have argued that the head motif should be seen as cultic – that is, applied as part of a ritual act – rather than as the specific focus of a cult. Nonetheless, certain deities and mythical figures have a particular and explicit connection with the head motif that cannot be overlooked, in that their traditions reassert aspects of the motif already discussed.

As noted above, Braithwaite links the head motif with Dionysus/Bacchus, whom she describes as 'the archetypal mask god... He alone, of all the Greek gods, was known and worshipped just as a mask'.<sup>75</sup> Dionysus was a transgressive figure, embodying social liminality through madness, intoxication and abandon, and in his worship his followers (usually female) could be dangerous. Orpheus was one of their victims, torn to pieces by the Maenads. In an echo of their own god's associations, his head was thrown intact into the river Hebrus, and floated, singing all the way, to the island of Lesbos, where it was placed in a shrine to Dionysus, and proceeded to utter prophecies.<sup>76</sup> Both Dionysus and Orpheus were seen as intercessors or psychopomps between this world and the next – later myths have Orpheus nearly rescuing Eurydice from the underworld, had he not looked back, or killed by Zeus for divulging divine secrets – and this role is shared with another of the Classical pantheon, Hermes/Mercury, whose wayside herms have already been cited, and who is also credited with bringing skills previously associated with the gods to humanity (a process more prosaically described as invention).

This also was a boon provided by the Norse god, Odin, another 'walker between worlds' who largely acquired the secret skills by cultivating the friendship of Mimir, the guardian of the knowledge-giving well at the foot

of the World Tree. When Mimir was beheaded by the Vanir, Odin begged the head off them, embalmed it and chanted over it in its accustomed place by the well; through these means, the severed head of Mimir was encouraged to speak again, to prophesy and divulge further wisdom. In pre-Christian Scandinavia, Odin could be portrayed by wooden face-posts identifiable by the single eye and lolling tongue.<sup>77</sup> Odin's tale has much in common with that of Bran as recorded in the medieval Welsh *Mabinogion*. Fatally wounded by a spear on a war trip to Ireland, Bran orders his surviving followers to cut off his head and bear it with them. He goes on to accurately prophesy details of their travels; for seven years the company, which comes to be known as the Assembly of the Wondrous Head, feast at Harlech, and then for another eighty years at Gwales. During this time, the head sees to their provision and entertains them, so that 'there came to them no remembrance either of that or of any sorrow in the world' – this is clearly intended to represent an otherworld sojourn, suspending time and mundane concerns. Finally, also as foretold, one of the number opens a certain window. This is the cue for them to remember their own world, and their ties to it; they move on to London and bury Bran's head in the White Mount, there to perform an apotropaic function against plague and invasion.<sup>78</sup> Common features are apparent among these pagan figures – e.g. the ability to journey between worlds, the power of speech, to prophesy, to acquire metaphysical gifts of entertainment and knowledge – which confer particular powers to severed heads; in Odin's case a further association with wells, cited above as a typical location of the head motif, is also explicit.

Within a Christian context, the head motif features, if not at god status, rather high in the hierarchy, thanks to the decollation of John the Baptist, which set something of a hagiographical template for future British martyrs; SS Winifred and Decuman, for instance, whose severed heads were associated with holy wells in North Wales and Somerset respectively, underline also the motif's association with water sites.<sup>79</sup> While building, as we have seen, on a pre-existing motif, it gave a kind of *carte blanche* for the motif within Christian iconography, particularly in the Roman tradition, and may be partly responsible for the profusion and development of the motif in Christian architecture, narrative and relics.<sup>80</sup> John the Baptist's skull became a much-venerated relic with an inestimable numinous valency, claimed in part or whole by various establishments. Among these were the Knights Templar, proscribed in 1312 on a range of accusations, including that they worshipped a severed head and/or a representation thereof. The Baptist legend, with its key image of John's head on a platter, also seems likely to have contributed in a dynamic and mystical interplay with proto-Grail narratives, most obviously in the mediaeval Welsh romance *Peredur*. *Peredur* witnesses a weird vignette that includes a severed head on a plate preceded by a spear with blood dripping from its point. Crucially, he does not ask the meaning of this marvel, but we later learn the marvellous procession is

related to the health and sovereignty of the land. In this way, a visual allusion exists with the Baptist's head, and a thematic and functional allusion with the Bran tale, which also includes a spear and a severed head, as well as protection of the land; indeed, Peredur's failure to ask the meaning suggests, rather than the injunction laid on him by an uncle not to pry, an entrancement in the presence of the head akin to that of Bran's followers.

## **Audience**

The head motif has been established as a persistent feature in contexts suggestive of interaction with an otherworld and its denizens. Is it still in question whether the associations drawn here regarding the image and its liminal deployment in structures and narratives can be accepted as evidence of ritual or magical intent in Christian Britain, or are instances of the motif encountered in more recent centuries simply a literary, didactic or artistic device devoid of deeper meaning? In some cases, this may well be the case; the sculptor, Ian Judd, told me that the techniques required in carving a human head make it a suitable test piece for stone. Alternatively, heads may mimic folk tradition without necessarily carrying the full import of that tradition, like those added by John Harper to Anne Lister's consciously-nostalgic rebuild of Shibden Hall, Halifax, in 1836. Similarly, a threshold location may 'make sense' without an implicit or explicit magical schema behind it – like a Buddha head placed in a niche over a doorway near Todmorden in the 1980s, 'because it seemed to fit'.<sup>81</sup> Yet to dwell on such instances surely misses the point made in the array of more obviously meaningful deployments of the motif. One way to consider this point is to ask who the intended audience might be, and what impact it may have been thought to express on that audience. Plainly visible devices on buildings, from heads to horseshoes, may offer balm to those preferring more reductionist explanations, however implausible in context, but heads are often found in hard-to-see locations, especially in churches dating from a time when spaces were less well lit – such as roof bosses, high window mouldings and pillar capitals. This militates against interpretation as didactic of Christian themes, an explanation popular in the nineteenth century, as well as against decoration,<sup>82</sup> and further intimates that the intended audience may not be human.

Further argument against decoration is the often frankly unattractive typology, unsuited to any display designed to impress; the two heads in a typical location above the main door at Wood Lane Hall (see above) depict a pleasant bearded and coiffured head (probably representing the upwardly-mobile owner, John Dearden), while the one above is a crude and more typical archaic head. The implication in this duplication is that the quasi-portrait was good for show to visitors, but to address a different audience something else was required. A further implication is that a naturalistic head

represents patron or status, conferring a decorative rather than apotropaic intent. Another example where decoration is clearly not the rationale is in the aqueduct head at Hebden Bridge, already mentioned. This head is placed on the opposite side of the parapet to the towpath and is invisible to passers-by; when the aqueduct was built in 1798, the head had no vantage point on dry land, but faced Black Pit, the confluence of the rivers Hebden and Calder, known to be the most dangerous stretch of the river in the upper valley. The inference in this case is that the audience is the river, and any entity thought to be associated with it. In coming across a carved head, or for that matter any object or sign that appears unnecessary in material function, we need to ask the point of it. If it seems to have little advantage to a human observer, the implication is that the audience is not of this world.

## Obligations

Odin's treatment of Mimir's head echoes the implication of guardian skulls that an object representing the values expressed in the head motif requires proper placement and respect, a crucial point that folklore and legend also emphasise. In a broader context, too, traditional understandings have it that any interaction with the magical realm embroils the parties in mutual obligations. The English folktale *The Three Heads in the Well* has variants in Germany and Scandinavia. In addition to repeating the association of heads and wells, it warns of the consequences of disrespecting a severed head. It tells of a disinherited young woman who encounters three talking heads in a well. Complying with their requests, she treats them well and in due course receives great good fortune.<sup>83</sup>

The Irish story of *Cath Almaine (The Battle of Allen)* again indicates what might happen if you treat a severed head well. Fergal, King of Ulster, is slain in battle, and his severed head taken off by the victors, washed and placed on a dais with a silken cloth; a feast is then placed before it, upon which Fergal's head flushes, opens its eyes, and thanks the enemies for their goodwill. Meanwhile, on the battlefield, Fergal's minstrel, Donn Bo, has also been decapitated, but still sings sweetly in praise of Fergal; his head is taken to the feast, too, placed on a pillar and asked to sing again in the presence of his lord Fergal. It turns its face to the wall and sings; and all in the hall are moved to grief.<sup>84</sup> Another Irish tale recounts the fate of Lomna, Finn's bard, who reveals Cairbre's intrigues with Finn's wife. Lomna is beheaded for his pains, and his head carried off by Cairbre's fleeing band. They stop at an empty house, and place Lomna's head on a spike by the fire while they cook some fish. However, on neither of two servings do they offer any to the head, for which they are reproved; the second time, tired of the complaints, Cairbre puts the head outside the door, and the third time that Lomna speaks brings Finn's pursuing posse to the door – not a good outcome for Cairbre's band.<sup>85</sup>

Other mediaeval tales, as well as later folklore and customs associated with head-hunting as described above, reaffirm the message that with a head, either stone or skull, there comes an obligation of respect, with the implication of reciprocal benefit. This was a point made by the Cleveland handyman and dialect poet, John Castillo (1792–1845), who was himself a sculptor of archaic stone heads. Deploring the damage done by youths throwing stones at one of his carved heads on a bridge in Glaisdale, he wrote

Bud there is sum unlucky lads  
 That wants correctin' be ther dads.  
 They might be in sum better pleeace  
 Than thrawin' steans at 'aud man's face

In this poem, Castillo is not only expressing disapproval, but also implying that bad luck may follow from their mischief, and he supplies us with a traditional by-name for the archaic head – the old man's face – that Clarke suggests may be of wider usage than just in Castillo's North Yorkshire.<sup>86</sup>

A more contemporary instance, clearly influenced by New Age approaches in the modern era, comes with an archaic head built into a roadside wall in Kettlewell, North Yorkshire, in the closing years of the twentieth century; below it is another stone, carved with the imprint of a hand, and with an inscription reading 'hold my hand and stroke my face and I will heal you from all pain'. In this artefact of modern folklore are articulated the need for a personal interaction with the head and a wholly contemporary emphasis on the positive results of such a ritual interaction.

Such narratives and lore, though widely separated in time and place, suggest the 'proper' treatment of a severed head – they do not imply worship or cult activity, but obligation; that if you wish to be on good terms with the often capricious supernatural world you encounter, then you should be prepared to hold up your end in the relationship.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

This necessarily brief review of the threads that must be woven into an understanding of the conceptualisation of the head motif in British folk tradition could be liberally expanded with examples of sites, legends, narratives and folklore re-affirming not only the widespread currency of the motif, but also its association with liminal scenarios involving physical thresholds, social taboos, protection from malign spiritual forces, communication with the otherworld and posthumous consciousness.<sup>88</sup> Such a listing would however serve little purpose other than to drive home the implications sketched above, that the head motif seems to have been conceived in liminal roles (including protector, gatekeeper, intercessor,

interlocutor and guide) that play an important role in conceptualisations of the esoteric realm, whether pagan, Christian or the in-between territory of folk magic.

The motif of the severed head appears widely in the above contexts across human cultures, but in Western Europe and particularly the British Isles has maintained particular vitality, as shown in periodic refluences. Overwhelmingly, wherever it is found there is an association with other-worldly dimensions, and a magical relationship with those dimensions. Over time, its manifestations have become less extreme – the cannibalism, head-hunting and imagery of the prehistoric world, attesting to a deep magical association of the human head with worlds and entities beyond this one, shifting to narrative representation, symbolism and the judicial equivalent of sacrifice, and thence to a weaker but still potent symbolic association with luck, extra-human communication and protection from malign forces. This trajectory is typical of traditional motifs, fading and mutating over time, while remaining expressive of a core meaning and an enduring place in the repertoire of traditional magical symbols.

## Notes

1. See e.g. Ian Armit, *Inside Kurtz's Compound* (Oxford, 2006), 1–14.
2. E. O. James, *Prehistoric Religion* (New York, 1957); Anne Ross, (1967/1974) *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967); P. Jacobsthal, *Early Celtic Art* (Oxford, 1944); Pierre Lambrecht, *L'exaltation de la tête dans la pensée et dans l'art des Celtes* (Bruges, 1954).
3. Ruth and Vincent Megaw, *Celtic Art* (London, 1990), 21; Miranda Green, *Celtic Art* (London, 1996), 138.
4. Megaw and Megaw, *Celtic Art*; Green, *Celtic Art*, 140, 121–122; John Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving in West Yorkshire and Beyond'. MA thesis, University of Sheffield (Sheffield, 1993), 10; John Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, Capall Bann (Chieveley, 1998), 31.
5. D. W. Harding, *The Archaeology of Celtic Art* (London, 2007), 57.
6. S. M. Bello, S. A. Parfitt and C. B. Stringer, 'Earliest Directly-Dated Human Skull-Cups', *PLoS ONE* 6(2) (2011): e17026, at: doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0017026. Accessed 17 April 2013.
7. Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, (London, 1987), 6.
8. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, Trans. A. A. Brill (New York, 1918), 37.
9. Miranda Aldhouse-Green, *Dying for the Gods* (Stroud, 2001), 96.
10. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving'; *Stony Gaze*.
11. James, *Prehistoric Religion*.
12. Julian Thomas, *Rethinking the Neolithic* (New York, 1991), 119–120; Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford, 1991), 33.
13. Hutton, *Pagan Religions*, 95; Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 100; G. A. Wait, *Ritual & Religion in Iron Age Britain* (Oxford, 1985).
14. Wait, *Ritual & Religion*, 117. It is notable that partial inhumations of this sort constitute only a small proportion of burials, raising the question of whether certain types of individual were selected for such treatment.

15. Dorothy Watts, *Religion in Late Roman Britain* (London, 1998). This is comparable to her estimate of 3 per cent of Iron Age burials showing skull separation.
16. J. L. Buckberry, and D. M. Hadley, 'An Anglo-Saxon Execution Cemetery at Walkington Wold, Yorkshire', *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 26(3) (2007), 309–329.
17. Sabine Baring-Gould, *Strange Survivals* (London, 1892), 53–54.
18. Given that the original architectural feature for skull display would have been a spike, it is possible that this was the origin of the obelisk-like 'witch pinnacles' on gables and kneelers of sixteenth- to eighteenth-century secular buildings, which were said to deter witches from perching on these locations.
19. Peter Brears, *North Country Folk Art* (Edinburgh, 1989); Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, 121–128.
20. Armit, *Inside Kurtz's Compound* (Cambridge, 2012), 11.
21. Helen Hickey, *Images of Stone* (Belfast, 1976), 16; Patricia Palmer, *The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue* (Cambridge, 2013), 5, 7.
22. Armit, *Inside Kurtz's Compound*, 3–4.
23. 'Headhunting', *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* Article 39696, acc'd 17 April 2013; M. E. Durham, 'Head Hunting in the Balkans', *Man* (1923), 133–135. It arguably persists today in jihadist practice.
24. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 36–37. See *The Battle of Allen*, discussed in this chapter below.
25. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 158; Miranda J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth & Legend* (London, 1997), 65.
26. Green, *Celtic Art*, 30–31; Iona Opie and Moira Tatem, *A Dictionary of Superstitions* (Oxford, 1993), 359; Anne Ross, 'Severed Hheads in Wells', *Scottish Studies*, 6(2) (1962), 31–48; David Clarke, 'The Head Cult', Unpub. Ph.D. thesis, University of Sheffield (Sheffield, 1998), 131–134.
27. Janet Bord, *Cures and Curses* (Wymeswold, 2006), 123–125; Clarke, 'Head Cult', 134–135.
28. Gillian Braithwaite, *Faces from the Past* (Oxford, 2007); Megaw & Megaw 1990:69–75.
29. Braithwaite, *Faces from the Past*.
30. Paul Blinkhorn, 'Tolerating Pagans for the Sake of Trade', *British Archaeology* (May 1999); 8–9.
31. Merrifield, *Ritual and Magic*.
32. Braithwaite, *Faces from the Past*, 401.
33. Jacqueline Simpson, 'The King's Whetstone', *Antiquity*, 53 (1979), 96–100.
34. Commissioned by James Murgatroyd of Halifax, who employed the head motif generously at his other buildings.
35. Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*.
36. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 101; Harding, *Archaeology of Celtic Art*, 221–222, 137, 149–152.
37. Green, *Archaeology of Celtic Art*, 40; Harding, *Archaeology of Celtic Art*, 54.
38. Stephen Bull, *An Historical Guide to Arms and Armour* (London, 1991), 39, figure 55; Cyril Mazansky, *British Basket-Hilted Swords* (London, 2005).
39. Miranda Green, 'The Religious Symbolism of Llyn Cerrig Bach and Other Early Sacred Water Sites', *Source*, 1 (1994), n. p.; Clarke, 'Head Cult', 86ff; Merrifield, *Ritual and Magic*; Ross, 'Severed Heads in Wells'; *Pagan Celtic Britain*.
40. St Winifred's Well at Holywell in North Wales, which sprang up where the saint's severed head struck the ground, and became a major pilgrimage site

in the mediaeval and early modern periods, is the classic example. See Jeremy Harte, *English Holy Wells* (Wymeswold, 2008); Janet Bord, *Sacred Waters* (London, 1985).

41. Ross, 'Severed Heads in Wells', 34–36; Clarke, 'Head Cult', 88.
42. Clarke, 'Head Cult', 88–89, 90–91; Merrifield, *Ritual and Magic*; Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, 21–24.
43. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 143–144.
44. Merrifield, *Ritual and Magic*, 45–47.
45. Bord, *Sacred Waters*, 103; Harte, *English Holy Wells*; James Rattue, 'Holy Wells and Headless Saints', *Source*, 5 (1998), n.p.
46. Quoted in Clarke, 'Head Cult', 288–290.
47. Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, 59–62; Brears, *North Country Folk Art*, 34–37.
48. Alby Stone, 'The Perilous Bridge', *At the Edge* 1 (1996), 7–10.
49. Clarke, 'Head Cult', 291–292.
50. Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, 59–61; Brears, *North Country Folk Art*, 34–35.
51. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 99.
52. Alex Woodcock, *Liminal Images* (Oxford, 2005), 120.
53. Nigel Pennick, *Beginnings* (Chieveley, 1999); and *Masterworks* (Loughborough, 2002).
54. For Iona: Aubrey Burl, *Rites of the Gods* (London, 1981), 225; Pennick, *Beginnings*, 37; for Holsworthy: England Howlett, 'Sacrificial Foundations', in Andrews, W. (ed.), *Ecclesiastical Curiosities* (London, 1899), 30–45.
55. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving', 42; Clarke, 'Head Cult', 306.
56. Baring-Gould, *Strange Survivals*, 61.
57. Ashmolean Museum, 'British Collection Highlights: The Medieval Chimney Pot', at: [britisharchaeology.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/highlights/chimney-pot.html](http://britisharchaeology.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/highlights/chimney-pot.html). Accessed 16 April 2013.
58. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving'; and *Stony Gaze*; Clarke, 'Head Cult'. Generally, only heads on fireplaces face the interior.
59. T. Tindall Wildridge, *The Grottesque in Church Art* (London, 1899).
60. Though this may be partly attributable to popular developments in heads research and pagan revivalism, an archaic head was intentionally placed as a 'ghostbuster' outside the Old Sun Inn at Haworth in 1973. Arthur Saul, pers. comm., June 1979.
61. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving', 45–46; David Cant, Hearts, 'Diamonds, Circles and Scrolls: External Decorations on Seventeenth-Century Houses', in Billingsley, J. (ed.) *Aspects of Calderdale* (Barnsley, 2002), 45–58; L. Ambler, *Old Halls and Manor Houses of Yorkshire* (London, 1913), 26.
62. Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, 154–156.
63. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving', 106; Nigel Pennick, *Primal Signs* (Cambridge, 2007), 101, 126.
64. Brears, *North Country Folk Art*, 41. Baring-Gould's suggestion regarding heads on towers might be recalled here, with accidental instead of sacrificial innuendo.
65. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving'; *Stony Gaze*.
66. Brears, *North Country Folk Art*; Sidney Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone Heads* (Shipley, 1973).
67. Brears, *North Country Folk Art*, 43, 32.
68. Clarke, David, 'Heads and Tales: The Screaming Skull Legends of Britain' (with Andy Roberts), *Fortean Studies*, 3 (1996), 126–159; and 'Head Cult', 327–346.
69. Jackson, *Celtic and Other Stone Heads*.

70. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving'; and *Stony Gaze*.
71. Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, 84.
72. Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*, 71–73.
73. In this, it is analogous to notions concerning the persistence of consciousness in the head for some time after decapitation, and symbolically represents perception of each side of the veil.
74. Billingsley, *Stony Gaze*.
75. Braithwaite, *Faces from the Past*, iii, 409.
76. My principal source for the following is Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, 1960).
77. A. H. Smith, 'The Luck in the Head', *Folklore*, 73 (1962), 13–24; H. R. Ellis-Davidson, *Scandinavian Mythology* (London, 1969); and *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1979).
78. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (trans.), *The Mabinogion* (London, 1974), 39–40.
79. Bord, *Sacred Waters*, 8–9; Rattue, 'Holy Wells and Headless Saints', 37–38.
80. It may also be connected with the development of the severed head motif in judicial, narrative and architectural contexts in the parish of Halifax, of whom St John is patron; according to local narrative dating from at least the seventeenth century, Halifax may even have once possessed a relic of the Baptist's head. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving'; and *Stony Gaze*.
81. Dick Pont, pers. comm., 1992.
82. I have argued ('Archaic Head-Carving', *Stony Gaze*) that such carvings may be seen, and perhaps deliberately located in relatively inconspicuous places, as potentially ominous, in the sense that when accidentally and suddenly seen, they may – like the flight of birds or the chance arrangement of divinatory entrails – take on a meaning for that moment, informed by the concerns and reactions of the observer. This potential is augmented by the duplication of liminality in both location-access to otherworld and appearance-access to otherworld entity. Woodcock, *Liminal Images*, 7–14.
83. Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London, 1974), 156–161.
84. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, 156–157. This echoes the Sarawak and Timor practices previously cited.
85. Baring-Gould, *Strange Survivals*, 196–196.
86. Brears, *North Country Folk Art*, 32; Clarke, 'Head Cult', 289–292.
87. 'Right action', though not specifically directed towards a severed head, is implied in the beheading sequences in the English tale *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; the Green Knight's severed head also retains the power of speech.
88. The interplay of legend, lore, judicial custom and vernacular architecture in the Halifax area of West Yorkshire offers a particularly rich study. Billingsley, 'Archaic Head-Carving'.

# 5

## Witch Bottles: Their Contents, Contexts and Uses

*Brian Hoggard*

Witch-bottles are unusual in the context of apotropaic (evil-averting) objects in that they were written about in pamphlets and books during the seventeenth century and later. Before launching into an examination of them, some points about the general difficulties involved in this topic should be made. Witch-bottles, like other apotropaic objects, were intentionally concealed so it is only when buildings are demolished, repaired, or when archaeologists excavate building sites that they come to light. In the case of demolitions and repairs the likely finders are the builders who quite often dispose of these objects because they don't know what they are. Sometimes the opposite is true and the witch-bottles are destroyed for superstitious reasons. This means that only very few get reported to the *Apotropaios* project ([www.apotropaios.co.uk](http://www.apotropaios.co.uk)) or to a local museum or archaeology unit. The number of witch-bottles found is also limited by how many buildings survive from any given period. Thus, the number of examples dealt with in this paper are likely to be only a tiny portion of the total number which were concealed.

### Written evidence

Ralph Merrifield cited four early modern documents in his work on witch-bottles: Joseph Blagrave's 1671 *Astrological Practice of Physick*, Joseph Glanvil's 1681 *Sadducismus Triumphatus*, Increase Mather's 1684 *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* and Cotton Mather's 1691 *Late Memorable Providences*, which all contain references to the practice of creating a counter-witchcraft bottle [1].

The reference in Blagrave's *Astrological Practice of Physick* appears in a section on 'experimental rules, whereby to afflict the Witch, causing the evil to return back upon them'. He describes:

Another way is stop the urine of the Patient, close up in a bottle, and put into it three nails, pins or needles, with a little white Salt, keeping the

urine always warm: if you let it remain long in the bottle, it will endanger the witches life: for I have found by experience that they will be grievously tormented making their water with great difficulty, if any at all, and the more if the Moon be in Scorpio in Square or Opposition to his Significator, when its done.

His reasoning for the success of the operation is as follows:

‘The reason...is because there is part of the vital spirit of the Witch in it, for such is the subtlety of the Devil, that he will not suffer the Witch to infuse any poysonous matter into the body of man or beast, without some of the Witches blood mingled with it’[2]

Clearly Blagrave is prescribing a method of turning the witch’s power back upon themselves by using the sympathetic link between the witch and victim. His mention of placing pins in the bottle is affirmed by a later author who mentions similar contents. It seems that the idea was that the bottle represented the witch’s bladder and, by inserting pins and the victim’s urine into the bottle, this would cause intense pain in that region to the witch, forcing the witch to lift whatever spell it was believed had been placed on the victim.

Cotton Mather described the contents of a witch-bottle in his 1691 work, *Late Memorable Providences* as, ‘Nails, Pins, and such Instruments...as carry a shew of Torture with them’.[3] Joseph Glanvil also relates a tale of witchcraft in his example mentioning witch-bottles. He speaks of a woman whose health had been languishing and a travelling cunning-man’s diagnosis that the cause of her malady was a ‘dead Spright’. He recommended that her husband;

‘take a Bottle, and put his Wife’s Urine into it, together with Pins and Needles and Nails, and Cork them up, and set the Bottle to the Fire, but be sure the Cork be fast in it, that it fly not out’.

The inevitable result was that the cork flew off with a loud bang and showered the contents everywhere. When they next saw the man he recommended burying the bottle instead, at which point the wife’s health began to improve.

But there came a Woman from a town some miles off to their house, with a lamentable outcry, that they had killed her Husband... But at last they understood by her that her Husband was a Wizard and had bewitched this Man’s Wife, and that this counter-practice prescribed by the Old Man, which saved the Man’s Wife from languishment, was the death of that Wizard that had bewitched her.[4]

Jason Semmens in his article 'The Usage of Witch-Bottles and Apotropaic Charms in Cornwall' also cites an early description of the making of a witch-bottle. Instructions for making one were given to a pregnant woman in 1701 in St. Merryn by a local conjuror. The description is here quoted from Semmens' article:

For Thamson Leverton on Saturday next being the 17th of this Instant September any time that day take about a pint of your owne Urine and make it almost scalding hot then Emtie it into a stone Jugg with a narrow Mouth then put into it so Much white Salt as you can take up with the Thumb and two forefingers of your lift hand and three new nails with their points down wards, their points being first made very sharp then stop the mouth of the Jugg very close with a piece of Tough cley and bind a piece of Leather firm over the stop then put the Jugg into warm Embers and keep him there 9 or 10 days and nights following so that it go not stone cold all that mean time day nor night and your private Enemies will never after have any power upon you either in Body or Goods, So be it.[5]

These early mentions of creating a counter-spell using a bottle are fascinating and all broadly give the same set of instructions about how to exploit the sympathetic link between the witch and her or his victim via an easily obtainable body fluid, urine. They instruct the victim to heat the urine with a mixture of salt and sharp objects until the pain this inflicts upon the witch becomes so great that the witch will be forced to make amends with his or her target.

Owen Davies has traced other later examples of the use of witch-bottles. During a case of spirit possession in Bristol in 1762 a local cunning-woman was consulted who confirmed that witchcraft was responsible for the fits, visions, voices and other manifestations that were suffered by the daughters of Richard Giles, an innkeeper. Her recommendation was that a witch-bottle be boiled and it is reported that the daughters recovered after this was carried out. Another example of the boiling of a witch-bottle proved fatal in 1804 when the cunning-man John Hepworth of Bradford experimented with boiling an iron witch-bottle which exploded, killing his client. [6] In earlier times it is more like that the cork or bung would have simply exploded outwards showering its contents in whichever direction the bottle was pointing.

The accounts only refer to burying or concealing the bottles if the heating was deemed unsuccessful. All of our examples are of the ones that were buried or concealed which suggests (perhaps surprisingly) that the process of heating the bottles did not work very well and that the practice of burying bottles was widespread and well known. It is my contention that this actually became the normal way to treat a witch-bottle.

### **The Greenwich bottle (seventeenth century)**

In 2004 a bellarmine bottle was discovered about 1.5m below the ground in Greenwich. The discoverers of the bottle found that it made a splashing and rattling sound when shaken, so they knew that there was something of interest within. It was arranged that Dr Alan Massey would have the opportunity to examine it. As a Dr of Chemistry with access to lab facilities at Loughborough University he is well equipped to analyse the murky liquid contents of a witch-bottle.

One of the first things he did was arrange for an x-ray to be taken of the bottle which showed a clear mass of small pins or nails in the neck and a few larger nails in the belly of the bottle. This mass of corroded pins in the neck is not uncommon in bellarmine witch-bottles as they were often inverted when they were concealed which leads to the material coalescing at the neck.

The x-ray did not reveal the presence of any liquid so a CT scan was arranged at Liverpool University which showed that there was a body of liquid which almost half filled the bottle. This liquid was tested initially using nuclear magnetic resonance and later using a combination of gas chromatography and mass spectrometry which revealed categorically that this was urine which had degraded over time.

When the contents were all extracted it was shown that the bottle contained twelve iron nails, eight brass pins, locks of hair, a piece of leather pierced by a nail, and fingernail parings. Several examples of pieces of fabric in the shape of a heart which have been pierced by nails or pins have been found inside witch-bottles so it is distinctly possible that this piece of leather was fashioned to represent a heart.

The bottle itself is consistent with other examples from the late seventeenth century and is currently held in the Exhibition Centre at the Old Royal Naval College in Greenwich.[7]

### **Felmersham bottle (seventeenth century)**

At a cottage in Felmersham, Bedfordshire, a bellarmine witch-bottle was discovered beneath the site of the old hearth by builders in late 2001. The house is estimated to be around 300 years old. The tiles were taken up because the floors were damp and beneath the dirt, cobbles were found. One area of the floor did not have cobbles and it was while digging in this area that the bottle was discovered in an inverted position with a clear blockage in its neck (excepting a small hole).

The bottle was discovered at around the same level as the cobbles. The builders washed the bottle and almost certainly destroyed the liquid evidence it contained. The bottle was collected by myself on 22 November 2001 and within a week taken to Dr Alan Massey in Loughborough for analysis of its

contents. A large lock of dark hair was discovered in addition to a congealed mass of nails and pins. It was then decided to consult Dr David Gaimster, the foremost expert on German stoneware who considered the bottle to have been produced in the mid to third quarter of the seventeenth century.

The builder who found the bottle and his friends eventually sold the item on ebay despite our arranging for a local museum to purchase it from them; its current whereabouts are unknown.

### **Loughton bottle (late seventeenth or early eighteenth century)**

In the grave of a young adult at All Saints Church, Loughton, Buckinghamshire, a glass steeple bottle was discovered lying between the left humerus and upper chest. The bottle contained several copper pins and a number of pins were also stuck into the cork. The bottle contains liquid which may be urine, although no analysis has yet taken place on this substance. The author of the report on the bottle, David Bonner, noted that witch-bottles are unusual in this context.[8] Based on currently available records for witch-bottles it seems that this is the only case of one being discovered in a coffin although several other bottles have been found buried in churchyards.[9] Despite the fact that the location for concealing the bottle is apparently unusual, it may have occurred more frequently than excavations have so far revealed in cases in which it was believed that death was caused by witchcraft. The contents of the bottle adhere to the formula of pins and urine and presumably the bottle was placed in the coffin as a kind of counter-witchcraft to perhaps help protect the body and soul in death or to exact revenge on the perpetrator of the witchcraft which was thought to have led to his death.

### **Coopersale bottles (eighteenth century)**

Three witch-bottles were discovered at a house in the district of Coopersale, near Epping in Essex. As part of renovations to the fireplace to restore it to its original size, material was being chipped away from the surface and at some point a whole section of plaster fell away revealing the first two bottles. They were discovered side-by-side set into plaster within the structure of a hearth and adjacent to a former rear entry into the house. The bottles were accidentally broken on discovery which meant that any liquid contents were lost. Photographs of the bottles were sent to Matthew Slocombe for analysis; Slocombe thought them to be late eighteenth-century in date. Although the bottles had broken and the contents had ended up being mixed up with rubble there were some traces of liquid and some hairs still visible at the time they were inspected. The owners of the house decided that they would put a glass panel across the parts of the bottles that remain in the hearth to preserve what is left and make a feature of it in their home.[10]

Later work revealed another bottle, apparently intact, further up the structure of the hearth and evidently sealed into the hearth in the same way. This bottle is entirely complete and clearly had something inside it but the home owners wished for it to remain in-situ rather than be disturbed.

A local researcher did some further research into the house and discovered that the lady of the house in the second half of the eighteenth century died around the close of the century and apparently the owner of the house was grief-stricken and sealed the house with all furnishings intact. The house was only reopened in the early nineteenth century and was quite an attraction when it was, having the tragic story behind it. It may be that the bottles were placed in the house as the owner believed that his wife was bewitched.

### **Staplehurst bottle (late eighteenth or early nineteenth century)**

A late example of a stoneware witch-bottle was discovered under the hearth of a farm in Staplehurst, Kent. When the bottle was found it contained nails and pieces of wood.[11] This example demonstrates the custom of burying the bottle by the hearth and also it shows the addition of material (the wood) not described in the early modern documents about witch-bottles. It is difficult to comment on the inclusion of wood in this case as no precise details about it were provided; however, in other examples small sharp pieces of wood were included and it seems that this was to inflict more harm on the witch in addition to the pins and nails.

### **Pershore phials (nineteenth century)**

In Pershore in Worcestershire two small glass phials were discovered along with three child's shoes and a collection of toys. The group was discovered under the floor or behind the hearth. In this instance the group of objects were dated to the mid-nineteenth century. The phials contained wheat husks and possibly some resin from a pine tree.[12] This is possibly residue connected with the production of pine beer which was once commonplace. The use of small glass phials becomes relatively common into the late eighteenth, and through the nineteenth century. Shoes are perhaps the most commonly encountered of apotropaic objects and often had an association with the hearth (see June Swann's chapter for more information about this, and Timothy Easton's chapter on 'spiritual middens'). The idea connected with the collection of objects appears to have been to bring together the shoes, two small bottles and toys to serve as a decoy for any bad influences that might want to attack the home via the chimney.

### **Wembley bottle (early twentieth century)**

A more recent example of a witch-bottle was discovered at St Augustine's Church, Wembley Park, where a bottle containing a liquid, possibly just

water, and a small pottery figurine was discovered. The figurine resembled the modern stereotype of the witch and it is possible that this 1906 deposit under a concrete floor was a modern re-interpretation of the witch-bottle.[13]

Many modern witches have reported to me that they use witch-bottles. The contents in some cases are identical to early witch-bottles and in others they are very different, using iron filings and herbs in one example or menses in another. The use is also different as they are used primarily by witches as protection against either non-specific negative energies of various kinds or other witches. Attempts to trace the source of the modern version of witch-bottles has proved unsuccessful but they appear to be widely used in the modern pagan witchcraft community.

## The bottles

Until the mid-eighteenth century the most popular form of bottle was the type of German stoneware which became popularly known as ‘bellarmines’ but glass bottles were also concealed with similar contents. At present there are 213 English examples of these bottles recorded in the files of the author which have come to light via a survey conducted from 1999–2001 and later accounts reported to the *Apotropaios* project ([www.apotropaios.co.uk](http://www.apotropaios.co.uk)).

The glazed stoneware bottles, known colloquially as ‘bellarmines’[14] – the technical term is ‘bartmann stoneware’ – are of various sizes and all have a large round ‘belly’. Most of these bottles have a small mask portraying a bearded individual of menacing appearance which has been placed onto the neck of the bottle, making them anthropomorphic in appearance. This mask takes the form of a clay tablet pressed into a mould and fixed to the bottle before firing. The bellarmines usually also have a medallion on the belly of the bottle which contains armorial devices, sometimes related to their location of origin and sometimes also showing their date of manufacture. These bottles were initially imported in large quantities from the Rhineland of Germany but later Dutch examples began to appear and English manufacturers began producing copies of them for mass production.[15] The colloquial name of these stoneware bottles, ‘bellarmines’, appears to have evolved around tales of Cardinal Bellarmine who was hostile to Protestants in the volumes on heresy he wrote in the late sixteenth century. It appears that some comparison between the mean face on the bottles and the perceived nature of the Cardinal was the satire here.[16] By 1700 the peak of importation of stoneware drinking vessels had ended and glass was becoming more commonplace. In the eighteenth century the use of glass bottles as witch-bottles becomes more usual and in the nineteenth and twentieth most examples are of glass.

M. R. Holmes investigated the origins and naming of these bottles in his 1950 article for the *Antiquaries Journal*. In this article he traced the evolution of the mask from the richly carved German examples found on tankards in the Rhineland, on which he comments, ‘The beard is square, the face

well formed and not without dignity'.[16] The English examples lack the same attention to detail and usually apply to bottles and jugs, not tankards. The expression on the mask in England is variously cheerful, neutral or aggressive. Holmes developed a type series broadly categorising the bottles in which he demonstrated the way in which the mask apparently had a reverse evolution from the neat and precise German examples through to no mask at all. His type series ranged from Type I, the German examples, through Type IX where the mask had become very simple. He completes his evolution with examples from the Fulham factory which bore no mask at all, but which were otherwise very similar. At any one time in the roughly 150-year span in which they were used as witch-bottles, several of the types described by Holmes can be found, but his work does allow the examiner of these bottles to ascribe a location of origin and a broad date range for the production of the bottle in question.

The highly durable nature of stoneware meant that they could be re-used many times and have a very long life indeed. Their anthropomorphic appearance with the face of a wild bearded man on the neck and the large, round belly would almost certainly have made people gravitate towards choosing them for magical purposes. The glass bottles which were increasingly used later on range in type across onion bottles, steeple bottles, small glass phials and jars, but earthenware still crops up too.

Of the 97 bottles which have been positively identified as bellarmine, only 39 have been dated. In many cases the dates are very approximate and vague. In 13 examples a seventeenth-century date was given. More detailed information was offered on 12 bottles which were described as Holmes Type IX, placing them rather broadly in the late seventeenth century and seven were described as Holmes Type VIII placing them somewhere in the region of 1664–1688. One bottle was described as mid-seventeenth century and some bottles were stamped with their date of manufacture; two of these were of 1600 and only one example of each of the following occurs: 1620, 1680, 1699 and 1700. Two bottles from Leicestershire have also been dated to 1627–1650. Although the known dates for the bottles are very incomplete, there does appear to be a distinct bias towards the latter half of the seventeenth century, suggesting an increase in the practice or a greater survival of vernacular architecture from this period.

Of the 213 witch-bottles on record, 97 could be positively identified as of the bellarmine type, a further 89 are glass or earthenware and 27 have been identified as witch-bottles by the museum or archaeological unit that holds them but full details have not yet been seen supplied to the author.

### **Distribution**

The distribution and extent of bellarmine witch-bottles shows a distinct bias towards the south east of England and parts of the south coast. This very closely matches those places which imported the largest quantity of

stoneware from the Low Countries. The distribution map contained in John Allan's 1983 article on the post-medieval trade in ceramics [15] clearly correlates with a map showing the distribution of bellarmine witch-bottles. Allan states that the East Anglian ports specialised in trade with those in Holland, which would explain the large number of finds in Norfolk and Suffolk. However, he also points out that imports into London in the last third of the sixteenth century accounted for 75 per cent of all imported stoneware into England. These goods were redistributed on ships along the English coast. The two principal ports which received redistributed stoneware from London were Colchester and Ipswich, both of which served areas with a high density of bellarmine witch-bottles. Allan states that overland transport was eight or ten times more expensive than transport by sea. However, local trade in small quantities did not pose that same problems as bulk orders of up to and over 1,000 bottles at a time that were common in the London ports [15], hence the redistribution of bottles into the catchment area of principal towns and sometimes beyond.

There is a good correlation between the distribution of bellarmine witch-bottles when compared to Allan's map of the redistribution of the bottles. The survey undertaken for this project did not reveal any examples of bellarmine witch-bottles further north than Leeds, yet clearly the trade in stoneware vessels did reach this far. The practice, therefore, had clear geographical limits within which the bellarmine bottle was considered the most appropriate vessel for that practice during its peak of high volume importing and manufacture – approximately 1550 to 1700. This is particularly evidenced by the relatively small numbers of these bottles found in a folk magic context at significant distances away from the nearest port. In terms of distribution, therefore, it can be concluded that (based on the evidence available) there appears to be a strong bias towards areas served principally by sea but also river ports in some cases. As time moves forward and the transport network improves there is much less of a clear pattern towards the distribution of witch-bottles.

Later on glass witch-bottles in the shape of small phials, bottles and occasionally jars can be found in all parts of Britain but still mainly in England. The practice does not appear in Europe despite this being the place where bellarmines were made, so it does appear to be an English invention.

## **Contents**

Of the at least 97 bottles known to be of the bellarmine Holmes Type 51 were found with the contents in varying states of decay. The contents of bellarmines found in folk magic contexts in the period concerned are striking in their general similarities, with few variations. Even where the contents appear to differ from the norm, there is usually a clear effort to find substitutes for unavailable items.

Of the 51 with contents, 44 contained iron nails and pins. Inside two examples were the tine of a rake, one contained red dust, one contained rust and one other contained a mass of metal. Assuming that these last five were also iron, a total of 49 of the bellarmine bottles with contents contained iron. Iron was not the only metal present within the bottles, however. Six bottles contained bronze pins in addition to iron nails or pins and out of the four containing what is described as brass pins, only one did not also contain iron. It must be stated that bronze and brass have the same elemental components in different quantities, so identification of the pins as bronze or brass is sometimes unreliable. Assuming this is the case, a total of ten have a bronze/brass alloy and, as already stated, only in one example did this alloy exist without iron also being present. In one bottle bent silver pins were discovered and in one other traces of copper were found.

One thing not mentioned in the seventeenth-century texts about witch-bottles but something for which there is ample evidence from the bottles themselves is the process of bending the pins or nails. In virtually all cases where pins or nails have been found in bottles they have been deliberately bent prior to inclusion in the bottle. It seems that this was done to ritually 'kill' the pins, activating a ghost pin which would be effective against spiritual enemies coming into contact with the bottle. This idea hinges on the perception of an invisible supernatural or spirit world including the dead, magical forces and perhaps divine forces. Dr Alan Massey has noted chips to the neck or rim of several of the bottles which he thinks may be evidence of the bottle being deliberately damaged too for a similar reason.

The results concerning the metal content of the bottles fully supports the primary source evidence from Blagrove, Mather and Glanvil that the bottles were intended to contain pins or nails. The other ingredient which it was recommended to include in the recipe described by these early modern authors was urine. In an early study of Suffolk witch-bottles, a total of nine bottles tested positive for the previous presence of urine using a basic phosphate test.[19] Although the basic phosphate test is not regarded as an extremely thorough test for the presence of urine, the smells associated with these bottles and the strong literary evidence for this part of the recipe are confirmed by the good success rate in tests. Many of the bottles were reported to have let out a 'hiss' or a 'pop' when they were opened indicating that something had vaporised and was causing pressure on the stopper, suggesting that some kind of liquid had been present. It seems likely that a great many of these bottles did once contain urine and, indeed, this has been borne out when serious analysis of the contents is undertaken such as that done by Dr Alan Massey, as noted above. Many of the bottles with no contents have been cleaned out by the finder, rendering any future analysis of the bottle almost futile.

Non-metallic or non-body fluid contents included three bottles that contained thorns, only one of which did not also contain pins or nails.

These could be an addition to the pins and, in the latter example, as a substitute for pins. All these items fit nicely with Cotton Mather's statement, 'Nails, Pins, and such Instruments... as carry a shew of Torture with them'. Additionally, one example contained tree bark, one contained a fragment of wood and one other contained a small number of blades of grass. These three may all constitute organic alternatives or additions to the principle of including objects with sharp points.

Other organic objects found in the bottles include bones. A total of five of the bottles contained bones of small animals such as voles and rats. Only two of these examples were found in addition to pins or nails, suggesting that small sharp bones were also seen as being an important ingredient which could, if necessary, be used in place of pins or nails. Other contents of the bottles also follow common themes but these objects do not appear to have been part of any published recipe in the early modern documents relating to these bellarmine. In 13 of the bottles human hair has been found. Human nail parings have been found in four bottles. Clearly the urine in the previous examples and these two ingredients are included so that they contain more of the personal body signature inside a bottle that has an anthropomorphic appearance. Further, two bottles contained small human figures. One was described as containing dolls and another, more doubtful because of decay, described as containing an effigy. This appears to be more evidence of 'humanising' the bottles. Another item which appears to serve this purpose is the piece of fabric cut into the shape of a heart which has been found in five examples stuck with pins. In one other example fabric was found which was badly degraded and its form was not clear. A finder reported on 'a twist of something' existing in the neck of one bottle which was subsequently thrown away, this accounts for one more of the 51 bottles with contents.

In summary, the order of most common ingredients in bellarmine witch-bottles are as follows: iron pins, nails or trace, 49; human hair, 13; urine, 12; bronze/brass pins, ten; bones five; heart-shaped fabric, six; thorns, three; human figures, two; tree bark, one; grass, one; human nail parings, one; silver pins, one; trace of copper, one and the final example that had 'a twist of something in its neck', one. Before dealing with the meaning of these objects which, owing to the widespread occurrence of the practice, must have had some significance, it is first necessary to look at the locations in which they were found.

Out of the total of 97 bottles which could be positively identified as bellarmine, 53 had their specific location within the building (or building remains) recorded. Of these 52, 26 were found either beneath the hearth stone or within the construct of an inglenook fireplace. This was by far the most common location for witch-bottles of the bellarmine type to be positioned within the building, based on currently available evidence. The next most common location was beneath the floor, where six examples exist.

A total of five bottles were found concealed beneath the threshold, either the doorstep or immediately adjacent. An unusual group of five bottles were discovered in a stone lined culvert in central London; although this only constitutes one incident, it distorts the figures slightly. Four bottles were discovered in, or beneath, walls. Gardens have yielded three examples so far but these may have been the former locations of other properties. One example was found in river mud, one in a ditch and one in open countryside.

Non-bellarmino witch-bottles show similar contents and locations but those later bottles have a broader distribution and, as we move into the twentieth century, a wider variety of contents as it seems the interpretation of the counter-spell was being modified over time. Out of 89 examples on file, 43 have recorded contents. Eighteen of these contained iron pins or nails, four contained hair and two have been proven to have contained urine although it is suspected that many more did due to the presence of some kind of residue inside the bottles. Some unusual items from within the bottles include written charms, small bones, frog skin, seaweed, stones, mass of lead, insects and in one case small lizards. Those which date from the seventeenth century still predominate in the south-east of England but later ones appear in Wales, Scotland, Yorkshire, Guernsey and can turn up just about anywhere. Their locations within the building was recorded in 53 of the examples with 16 of these being found in or near the hearth, 13 found under the floorboards, 14 in walls, five outside of buildings, one in a ceiling, two in a roof and two with dead bodies.

## **Usage and meanings**

The written evidence cited at the beginning of this chapter gave a clear description of the intended use for witch-bottles. They were specifically used to cause pain to a witch, exploiting the sympathetic link between a witch and her or his victim. The bottle was to symbolise the witch's bladder and into it the victim would put his or her own urine, hair, nail parings, pins, nails or anything else with a 'shew of torture' about it. This would then be heated on a fire causing excruciating pain to the witch who should then be forced to come knocking on the victim's door begging for the heating to stop – in return for which victims could negotiate a release from whatever malign influence the witch had cast onto them. If this failed, the advice was to bury the bottle and, as we have seen, there are a great many buried bottles already discovered and presumably many more remain to be found under floors and in walls. A very important part of this process was the ritual 'killing' of the pins or nails before inclusion in the bottle and possibly also the deliberate damaging of the bottle – both done to render the bottle and contents active on a more spiritual plane.

The effort that went into burying or concealing these bottles was often very significant. No doubt some were buried with minimum effort but there

are many examples where bottles are found a full metre below flagstones in front of the hearth. This level of effort is a testament to the strength of belief that people had in the efficacy of this practice and also to the belief that whatever bad fortune was befalling them was caused by witchcraft. The frequency of concealments in front of the hearth also points to the belief that this vulnerable opening in the home was perceived as being the principle point of entry for any bad energies or spells that might be aimed at someone.

The location of witch-bottles within the building is also important. Of those which had their location recorded 44 per cent were found beneath or within the hearth; this was by far the most common location for the bottles overall. The next most common location of the bottles was found under the floor followed by the threshold, in or beneath walls, and the remainder were found in various locations outside of known buildings, including a group found in a stone-lined culvert in London.

The hearth appears, as has already been noted, to have been a focal point for many of the artefacts which can be discovered concealed in buildings. It was always open to the sky and it was also the place where the whole family would gather in winter in order to keep warm. R. W. Brunskill has described it as follows: 'It is impossible to exaggerate the significance of the hearth in the design of vernacular houses...it has been suggested that the house began as a shelter for fire and that it was fire that made the house sacred'. [20] It was a point of vulnerability for those who believed that dangerous creatures, including the witch, were abroad at night and as such needed to be protected.

The apparent popularity of the hearth as a good place to bury a witch-bottle raises interesting questions about their purpose. If the practice was to follow the seventeenth-century texts precisely it should not really matter where exactly the bottle is buried because the way the spell was thought to work was via the sympathetic link between the witch and her or his intended victim. Yet the evidence shows that nearly half of all bottles were concealed in or near the hearth with another ten per cent at thresholds, indicating that the person doing the work wanted to protect those areas specifically. It seems possible, therefore, that the burial of a witch-bottle by the hearth or threshold may not always have been as a specific retaliatory act against the witch and may also have served a more general protective purpose. In support of this, burial by the hearth or threshold is a popular location for other house protection methods such as shoes.

Also, if the creation of a witch-bottle was a specifically retaliatory counter-spell then it seems strange that so many bottles remained buried. This could have been either because it was too much effort to remove it or because there was a belief that the bottle would continue to have a protective function beyond whatever events caused it to be created in the first place.

It seems likely, therefore, that people began making and concealing witch-bottles as a general part of their apotropaic armoury in the home in

anticipation of needing to ward off negative forces. It' is also possible that people may have begun to use witch-bottles more as spirit traps instead of as bladder torturing devices.

If people believed that the hearth needed to be protected in particular due to it always being open to the sky then this clearly implies that something would come down it. Here it can be surmised that believers imagined that an actual body of energy of some kind could be projected from the witch and become airborne, aimed at its potential target with a kind of scent of its intended victim. Upon entering the chimney it could smell its victim and would plunge downwards to attack, only to discover it had been fooled and would then be trapped inside the belly of a tiny, urine-filled humanoid (the bellarmine) and skewered by the ghosts of dead pins, nails and thorns. In this way the bottle acted as a spirit trap, similar to the way concealed shoes may have worked but with more lethal consequences.

## Conclusions

A richer context for an understanding for these bottles will be provided in subsequent chapters. Here it can be said that they appear to have originated in England towards the end of the first third of the seventeenth century at a time when bellarmine bottles were being imported in huge numbers from the continent. Initially this particular type of bottle seems to have been the specified vessel for this counter-spell chosen for its anthropomorphic appearance which makes it perfect for magical practice. So it is not entirely surprising that there is a close link between distribution maps for these bottles and evidence of the practice. As production of glass bottles increased during the eighteenth century and imports of stoneware fell, a natural shift towards using glass bottles as witch-bottles took place. By this time the practice had begun to be much more widely distributed throughout England and glass bottles could be obtained almost anywhere, not simply via the seaports.

Seventeenth-century texts are quite clear that witch-bottles should be made using urine and sharp objects and that they should be heated to inflict pain upon the witch; the idea being that this would compel the witch to do a deal that would 'unbewitch' their victim. It was suggested that should the heating process not produce the required results then the victim should bury the bottle and it is this evidence that archaeologists and builders occasionally find.

The material evidence suggests that magical, or witchcraft, forces were perceived as very real, in a similar way to how we now think of electricity or perhaps even wi-fi. These forces were powerful but invisible and experts in their use could manipulate them for good or ill. It was of critical importance to put in place decoys and traps containing the essence of the house occupants in case an attack was ever directed at your home. Witch-bottles

formed a potent part of that line of defence alongside other measures which are described in this volume.

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# 6

## Concealed Animals

*Brian Hoggard*

A large quantity of dried cats, horse skulls and other animal remains have been recovered from buildings over the years. Their location within the buildings and the circumstances of their arrival within the buildings often suggests that they were intentionally concealed in a similar way to that of witch-bottles. In this chapter some case studies will be explored along with theories as to why these animals and remains were used in this way.

### **Dried cats**

In a survey conducted in 1999 of archaeological units and museums, and with appeals in the media and society newsletters, it was discovered that dried cats were very commonly discovered in buildings of all types throughout England, Wales and parts of Scotland.[1] Ralph Merrifield referred to dried cats in his work of 1987 [2] but no one has until now addressed the topic as fully as Margaret Howard did in her 1951 article.[3]

These cats are found in roof spaces, under floors, between lath and plaster panels and occasionally in sealed cavities where they have been intentionally interred. Sometimes they are found posed as if on the hunt with an accompanying mouse or rat. Examples of the latter require a certain amount of wire-work to keep the cat in position, something which we find at times where cats have been attached to joists, beams or posts. In these cases significant time and effort would have gone into preparing and positioning the animal.

Theories about why dried cats are frequently discovered in buildings vary. Many individuals, when asked, ridicule the suggestion that the animals were intentionally placed in the building, preferring to believe that they crawled into a tight space and became trapped or crawled away to die. While this is distinctly possible it does not account for many examples which have clearly been sealed into places or fixed into position. In some cases it is difficult to tell if the animal has been purposely concealed or not, but it is worth noting that the smell of any animal which dies in a house is usually

sufficiently bad to suspect that few cases of accidentally trapped animals would have been left if it were possible to remove them.

There are two main theories put forward as to why cats are concealed in buildings and both were outlined by Margaret Howard. In her paper she explored both the foundation sacrifice idea and also the possible practical function of vermin-scares. The conclusion to her paper was a combination of both ideas:

The evidence at present available thus suggests that, generally speaking, the cat was first immured for utilitarian reasons, but, having become an object of superstition, it came to be used as a luck-bringer or building sacrifice and also as a protector against magic or pestilence.'[3]

Roughly 6 per cent of the cats discovered so far were posed as if they were hunting (e.g., at Christchurch Cathedral, Dublin). These examples are the ones cited as evidence that the cats were set up as vermin scares. Rats in particular are probably more likely to eat a dead cat than run away from it, however fierce it looks, and it certainly wouldn't take them very long to learn that the tableau posed no threat. In the event that an individual chose to experiment with using dead cats as vermin scares, it seems likely that the practice would be a short-lived one and soon overtaken by the idea that live cats do the job far more effectively. If, as argued later in this paper, the cats were intended to act on a more spiritual or ethereal level than a vicious looking cat frozen in time might act almost like a gargoyle or guardian, warning away spiritual foes such as the witch's familiar. If then, the spirit of the animal emerged and began to attack or fight the intruder then a fairly potent example of counter-witchcraft can be seen.

The idea of foundation sacrifices was also discussed in the paper as the less probable of the two theories. The evidence put forward is that of the ancient tradition of foundation sacrifices to appease the land and local gods.[3] It has also been suggested by several people during the course of this research that the sacrifice is to the building itself, to give it a life so that it will not take one later through some kind of tragic accident. John Sheehan's in-depth study of a dried cat found at Ennis Friary in County Clare came to the conclusion that it, 'appears to have been the subject of a seventeenth-century reduced form of foundation sacrifice'.[4] This theory certainly has some appeal and provides continuity with ancient evidence for foundation sacrifices, although more usually those are associated with the ground (whereas cats are normally found within the building structure), and in known examples connected with horse skulls there is often some ritual involved.

Howard also discusses the bad treatment that cats received in the Middle Ages through their association with witchcraft and the devil. Black cats were variously tortured, whipped and burned according to a variety of folk

customs throughout Europe as there was a perceived association with the devil. In England, where there was a strong belief in the witch's familiar, the cat could be seen as the agent of the witch.

The way in which cats were perceived provides an alternative theory which may be presented purely out of observation of cats and comparison with other finds. Certainly witch-bottles and probably the other finds were concealed as some form of house protection. The locations within the house in which cats are found compares well with the other finds – they have been found concealed most commonly in walls, but also under floors and in roofs. As a result of their nocturnal habits, relative independence, distinctive eyes and lightning reflexes cats can be viewed as mysterious creatures, which no doubt assisted in their popular association with witchcraft and the devil in the Middle Ages. Cats also perform a role which is helpful to humans, in terms of catching vermin. A combination of these perceptions along with the belief that a cat could become a servant of some kind (like a familiar) could quite easily explain why it was perhaps hoped that a dead cat concealed in a building might continue its vermin catching role on a more spiritual plane of existence. It may have been hoped that the cat could ward off evil spirits and the familiar of the witch and it seems that, however the practice began, this was one of the perceived functions of it in more recent centuries.

A dried cat and rat were discovered in thatch at Pilton, Northamptonshire, when the house was demolished in 1890. The cat is said to have been held down with wooden pegs.[3] It is unlikely that this cat, and some of the following examples, were accidentally trapped in buildings. A dried cat was discovered at St Cuthbert's Church, Clifton, near Penrith in Cumbria. It was discovered between slates and plaster in the roof of the church during restoration in the mid-1840s. The church dates from the twelfth century but it is likely that the cat was added to the fabric during roof repairs at some much later date.[5]

In a house in Parracombe, North Devon a dried cat, thick glass jam jar, sardine tin and horseshoe were all discovered together in an iron bread oven which had been bricked-up. They are likely to have been concealed at the end of the nineteenth century or early twentieth century.[6] A cat was discovered in a seventeenth-century cottage at Black Moss reservoir in Pendle. It had been found in an internal room which had been sealed off in the nineteenth century. Its location led to much press speculation about the dwelling being a witch's cottage.[7]

In 2003 a dried cat was discovered in the thatch of a sixteenth-century cottage in Eckington, Worcestershire. It was found in a very old part of the thatch, so this may be a very early example. Two dried cats were found inside a Tudor cottage in Sittingbourne, Kent. Another example was found in a house in Mexborough, South Yorkshire. A dried cat was discovered in 1915 in Woburn Abbey during demolition work – according to a television

report it was found 'in an airtight brick container' and retained its skin and whiskers but its fur was gone. The cat was on display at the Walter Rothschild Zoological Museum in Tring, Herts.[8]

These unfortunate creatures can be found all over England and Wales. There are one or two accounts from Scotland including two cats held at the museum in Elgin and some from Dumfries but they are certainly not known to be commonplace north of the border. Many examples have been found in Ireland.[9] There are a few examples from mainland Europe but as of yet not in sufficient numbers to indicate a widespread practice.

Many more examples of cats which have been concealed with obvious intent could be provided here. Taking all the cases as a whole there does not appear to be any obvious evidence that cats have been concealed alive; however, individuals have reported modern cases where cats have gone missing during building and later been discovered sealed alive into places where it would have been impossible not to have noticed the presence of a cat.[10] Howard relates an example from Gibraltar where a family cat disappeared during building works in 1879. Another correspondent informed me that a pet cat went missing during some building work on a property belonging to a relative in Dorset in the second half of the twentieth century. When investigated it turned out the cat was trapped in a very small cavity in the new build and the builders claimed that the animal had got there by accident. Those who saw the space were sure that there is no way the presence of a cat could have been missed in such a small space and that the animal had been purposely trapped inside. This suggests both that the practice still occurs in some areas and that, on occasions at least, they are sealed in alive. In many of the cases from previous centuries, however, the evidence of cats being manipulated and attached to beams suggests that they were dead already.

Dried cats are the most frequently disposed of type of object which can be found in buildings for obvious reasons. They are usually thrown away or burned and as a result very few well documented cases survive compared to the very large amount of anecdotal references which exist for them. In the survey only 161 documented cases of dried cats have been reported for England and for those which have been dated according to their context within the building there is a fairly even spread from the seventeenth century through to the early twentieth. At present only around 20 per cent of all the dried cats contained within the author's database have been dated. This illustrates clearly how difficult it can be to arrive at a date for when these animals were placed in the buildings. The age of the building from which they came gives us a maximum age (if known) but quite often there is evidence that the animal was interred within the building at a point of restoration, modification or simple repair which, without expert analysis, is not always so easy to date and can sometimes be a couple of centuries later than the original building.

From speaking with builders it has become apparent that a very large number of dried cats are discovered but never formally reported. A builder from Pershore reported an interesting example which demonstrates what can happen when an object like this is discovered during a project. The builder told me in 1999 that he was working on converting an old stable block at Croome Court (Worcestershire) into apartments when the work crew discovered a dried cat sitting between two lath and plaster panels. The foreman on the site ordered someone to get rid of it by throwing it into the skip but no one wanted to – they all felt deeply superstitious about it and did not want to touch it. He also reported that he felt it would be bad luck to move it. Ultimately the builder was ordered to move it which he did, reluctantly. After placing the cat in the skip he returned up the stairs into the stable block where a plaster panel from the ceiling fell down and struck him across the forehead resulting in a nasty cut. The builder and his friends remained convinced that this was because they moved the cat.

There are very few reports which suggest that dried cats were intentionally concealed in buildings on the continent, suggesting that the practice, like witch-bottles, was mainly something that happened in Britain. It is possible that this was because of the strong belief in Britain regarding the witch's familiar, something which was not a large feature of witchcraft beliefs in mainland Europe. The concept of the witch having an animal helper which had magical qualities was clearly an idea that those who feared witchcraft could harness to their own ends effectively having one of their own animals attached (sometimes literally) to the home. So it can be argued that the dried cats were intended to act as wards against the witch's familiar and other bad energies that may enter the home. The concept of ritually killing something to make it function on a spiritual rather than physical level is one that is found in the practice of making witch-bottles, and it seems that the same idea is being utilised here, but with cats. The difference here is that this spirit is active in death, on the prowl seeking out vermin.

## **Horse skulls**

Concealed horse skulls have been found throughout England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and there are several reports from the USA too. There have not been as many recorded examples of horse skulls as there have been for the other objects which have been found in buildings. The author's survey has collected a total of 54 examples of these in England, Eurwyn Wiliam cites 27 examples from Wales in his paper on the subject [11], Seán Ó Súilleabháin collected numerous testimonials of the practice being carried out in Ireland in his 1945 paper on foundation sacrifices [12] and there is one example from Scotland on file.

It is likely that many finds of bones and skulls in buildings meet a similar fate in rubbish tips to those examples of dried cats which are discovered. It

also seems to be the case that many of these objects are not reported when they are discovered. The fact that some of them are buried beneath the floor of many buildings also makes them a little less likely to turn up. A further complicating factor in the case of bones is their use as building material in some houses and farm buildings. There are many examples of entire floors or walls which have been created out of animal bones or teeth [13] in the numbers presented here only those which do not appear to have a structural function have been included. Where bones are found in buildings with no apparent structural function then the theories presented below regarding horse skulls can apply.

In 1879 at a pub called the Portway in Staunton-on-Wye, Herefordshire, 24 horse skulls were discovered screwed to the underside of the floorboards. The reason given for the skulls being there was that the floor made 'a hollow sound when the dancers stamped their feet, as was the custom in some old country dances'. [14] At High House in Peterchurch, also in Herefordshire, renovations revealed the presence of 27 horse skulls under the floorboards. [15] In Manuden, Essex, a horse skull was discovered in 1979 in a seventeenth-century cottage. The owner uncovered a brick built bread oven which had been sealed up at some point and inside it was a horse skull. Merrifield reported that many horse skulls were removed from beneath the parlour floor of Thrimby Hall where they had reputedly been placed 'for purposes of sound'. He also reports a horse skull was found concealed in a cavity between a chimney flue and two enclosing brick walls at Little Belhus, South Ockenden – thought to be of the sixteenth or seventeenth century. [2] A complete and articulated horse skull and neck was found in a well at Grove Priory Bedfordshire, dating to the first part of the fourteenth century. [16] Two horse burials are noted at Blackden Hall in Cheshire. A horse skull is reputed to have been found at Hailes Abbey in Gloucestershire. Another was discovered in a house known as Squeen Lodge at Ballaugh, Isle of Man. 'While the builders were removing the first floor joists they uncovered what appeared to be a skull and hip bone set into a joist hole... [on investigation] ...it was in fact a horse's skull with twin boar tusks inserted into the tooth sockets of the upper jaw' The find is thought to be of the eighteenth century. [17] These are just some examples of the type of contexts in which the skulls are found. There have been three main theories put forward by different authors which have been used to explain their presence: the acoustic theory, the idea of foundation sacrifice and the general idea that they bring good luck.

In 1945 Seán Ó Súilleabháin undertook a survey of concealed horse skulls in Ireland by asking members of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland to enquire in their local areas about the practice. In almost every area of Ireland it was reported that the skulls were concealed in several houses, most usually under a stone before the hearth. The explanation given in many cases was that doing this improved the sound when dancing took

place before the fire.[12] Ó Súilleabháin himself was not convinced by the acoustic theory, believing that this was a modern interpretation which had evolved in order to explain the presence of horse skulls in buildings long after the original reason had been forgotten:

It can hardly be doubted that the now popular explanation of the burial of horse-skulls under the floors of houses, churches, castles, or bridges (to produce an echo) is a secondary one. It may indeed be a practical explanation but a little consideration of the problem must inevitably lead to the conclusion that this custom is but another link in the chain of evidence regarding foundation sacrifices.[12]

Ó Súilleabháin's conclusions were disputed by Albert Sandklef of Sweden who undertook research into the custom across Scandinavia. He found that it was a common practice in southern Scandinavia to conceal horse skulls and pots beneath threshing barn floors and the reason provided was that it helped to produce a pleasant ringing tone while threshing. Sandklef's ultimate conclusion was that the skulls were only concealed for acoustic purposes and that the foundation sacrifice theory was invalid.[18] Eurwyn Wiliam, in his study of horse skulls in Wales, concluded after consideration of the both theories that the real answer to this practice is still elusive. He did, however, think that it is possible that 'it may be that we have here a custom, weakened by no longer serving its original function and with that function metamorphosed over time, rejuvenated and given a new imperative by fresh factors' p. 146. This essentially supports an ancient origin for the practice but in Wiliam's view this was changed in Wales from the eighteenth century onwards by an interest in the acoustic properties of the new chapels and the growing importance of the horse in the agricultural revolution of the nineteenth century.[11]

Another contributor to the debate, Caoimhin Ó Danachair, provides some good evidence in support of the acoustic theory. He states that the horse skulls were placed under the hearthstone but were sometimes replaced by an iron pot. He describes how 'a hole was made in the clay [beneath the hearthstone] and in it a small flat-bottomed pot-oven was hung from two thin iron rods laid crossways over the hole. An irregularly-shaped piece of worn-out iron plate (possibly part of a large griddle) was laid over the hold and the flagstone was set in place to cover the lot' p. 22. He states that this particularly occurred in Clare, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary and that the hearthstone is the spot where people would demonstrate their dancing.[19]

In several cases where horse skulls have been discovered the acoustic theory does not appear to be relevant and in some cases it does. For example, in Elsdon Church in Northumberland a box containing three horse skulls was discovered in the bell turret during restoration work in 1837.[20] These skulls may have been placed there to enhance the sound of the bells, but

this could also demonstrate an association with one of the original functions of church bells, to scare away evil spirits. An example which has no apparent acoustic function is cited by Merrifield where a horse skull was found concealed in a cavity between a chimney flue and two enclosing brick walls at Little Belhus, South Ockenden, Essex.[2] Evidence from horse skulls found at Bay Farm Cottage, Carnlough, County Antrim also suggests that no acoustic function could be derived from the placing of at least ten horse skulls beneath a floor.[21] These examples would tend to suggest that the acoustic theory does not provide a full explanation.

There is the evidence of ritual to consider too. In 1897 during the building of a chapel in the fens a ritual using a horse's head on a stake was undertaken to 'drive away evil and witchcraft' p. 126 (Merrifield 1987). The head was 'anointed' with beer before being covered with bricks and mortar. A young boy was sent off to a knackers yard to fetch one for the purpose.[2] In several of the Welsh examples there was a clear belief that the skulls in the properties were to protect against evil and witchcraft with some from church roofs thought to 'dispel the spirits'. [11] Certainly many of the skulls that have been discovered could not have had any kind of acoustic functions and in those cases apotropaic explanations fit rather well.

As in the case of dried cats, it may be that some of the perceived qualities of the horse also played a role in this practice. Horses serve humans in a direct way through transport and work and they are not generally regarded as food animals. They are also seen as particularly sensitive creatures, highly alert and are generally valued above other animals. Perhaps it was hoped that these qualities would be effective in protecting the house. One report suggested that the head of a favourite horse (upon its natural death) be used for this purpose which seems to endorse the idea of bringing the good influence of an animal into the home.[22]

Some of the finds of horse skulls have been explained by correspondents as bringing luck into the house, but how this association began is not clear. The placing of horse skulls within buildings can be said to have dubious acoustic worth in many instances. There are reports that they were placed there to ward off evil spirits at the foundation of buildings and also later on in other parts of the structure. The concealed nature of the items suggests that they were positioned in secret which may have contributed to the perceived importance of the act and also suggests their use as a ward against evil.

Without conducting tests on floors beneath which many skulls have been placed it is difficult to know for certain whether the acoustic theory carries any genuine weight but it does remain as a popular explanation. Quite a few examples of skulls have been found located in the pulpit of churches or, as Sandklef reported, in large quantities beneath threshing barn floors in Scandinavia. These could provide evidence for this explanation but there are other ways of enhancing acoustics and it must be remembered that

there are clear examples of horse skulls apparently being used for apotropaic purposes. If they were used for acoustic purposes then it seems clear that there was already an association between the horse skull and the aversion of evil and that perhaps this brought an additional benefit to the practice.

The evidence suggests that the use of horse skulls in buildings in the British Isles appears primarily to have been to ward off evil. The locations they are found in, the secrecy involved in concealing them and the patchy nature of the evidence regarding the acoustic theory backs this up. There are instances where they have been knowingly used for acoustic purposes so there clearly was a level of understanding about this too, although it seems peculiar that this fairly practical usage wasn't more openly discussed and recorded. The likelihood is that both uses were known and understood fairly widely by those who were involved in building but also that the practice of placing a horse skull into a structure and its association with counter-witchcraft may have been frowned upon, hence the secrecy associated with it. A horse skull is an impressive looking thing and does have a very powerful presence about it and these are two traits that were almost certainly employed by the people who concealed them.

### **Other animal remains**

Many other examples of animal remains have been discovered in buildings: dogs, donkeys, horses, bulls, rabbits and chickens have all been found in deliberately concealed contexts. The broad reasons for burying and secreting these animals are probably the same as for cats and horse skulls (as described above) but they are worthy of note because they are exceptions to the norm and occasionally they really do represent something very different. Please note that the following examples represent a minority of the finds of concealed animal remains and by far the bulk are made up of cats and horse skulls.

Cow skulls have been found in several locations in Ireland and elsewhere and appear to have been used more specifically for warding off illness in other cattle. Paul Sieveking relates a modern account of the use of a cow skull from the USA in an article in the *Sunday Telegraph* in 1999. He described how a farmer in Maine had a large herd of cattle but was losing animals periodically to an unidentified illness and had been reminded that his grandfather always kept a cow skull on the barn to ward off evil. He had always thought it was superstitious nonsense but after sufficient losses thought it worth a try and the illness rate of his cattle dropped significantly. It was reported that he extended the practice to having 16 cow skulls adorning his fence.[23]

There are just five examples of concealed dogs. A Pekinese dog skull was found beneath the foundations of a house dating from 1750 in Douglas, Isle of Man.[24] A mummified whippet was discovered beneath the floorboards of the

tack room of a pub called The Carlton in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. The pub dates from 1898 so this is a fairly recent concealment.[25] At the Crown Hotel, High Street, Alton, Hampshire, the skeleton of a dog was found behind a wall during alterations in 1967. This place was reputedly haunted by 'dog-like scratchings' which alarmed the owners' own pets prior to this discovery.[26] A dried puppy was found amongst 40 sacks of straw and dust beneath the floorboards of two rooms in the roof of Walnut Farm, in the region of Corfe Castle, Wareham. A child's cloth shoe was also discovered along with some coins, leading to the conclusion that these finds were of the eighteenth century. In Scotland a dog skeleton was found in building foundations in Ullapool.[27]

At Birkenhead Priory in 1896 the bones and skull of an adult sheep complete with horns was discovered in one of the buttresses. The author states that '[t]he stones were all properly faced inside, showing that the cavity had been intentionally built', and '[i]t seems clear that the sheep was deliberately immured in the recess prepared for it, and whether or not this constitutes a genuine example of a foundation sacrifice the facts are here recorded'.[28]

A whole donkey was apparently buried in a barn in Caldecote, Hertfordshire. This was reputed to have been done to ward off a local beast which had been roaming around. Rather unusually a headless horse was discovered during a new development for Stafford College in 2003. This was thought to be a medieval find and experts are puzzled as to why a horse might be buried instead of its hide and bones used, let alone that it has no head.[29]

All types of apotropaic objects are just as likely to be found on church property as anywhere else and there are two excellent examples from a pair of England's finest cathedrals. Two bulls are reputed to have been buried beneath Canterbury Cathedral. In a similar ecclesiastical deposit, ox skulls and boars' tusks were apparently found in the foundations of old St Paul's Cathedral.[30] Both of these would be very early deposits compared to most of the other finds listed in this chapter.

The stretched hairless skin of a rabbit (or a young hare) on a stick was found embedded in the wall of a house near Hitchin, Hertfordshire.[30] At Calke Abbey in Derbyshire the skeleton of a hare or rabbit was found in a stone lined grave in the foundations of the building, possibly of Tudor origin. In Falmouth a rabbit was discovered buried in a coffin at the top of a wall in a house.[30] Chickens have been found in a few locations (a photograph of one example was made famous in Merrifield's book, p. 130, Fig. 41. (Merrifield 1987)). Chicken bones were found in the wall of a cottage in Lower Moor, Worcestershire. A chicken was found in the chimney of Potterne House, Devizes, Wiltshire in 1874. At the Bedern Foundry in York, a pit was discovered which contained the skeleton of a cat and several chickens – thought to be a foundation deposit. At the Broadgate East site in Lincoln, the skeletons of a cat and three hens were discovered in the infill of a stone lined pit beneath a seventeenth century occupation floor.[31]

It is important to point out that sometimes animal remains were not used for any kind of magical purpose. There are many examples of bones or teeth being found in buildings – sometimes this is clearly a case of them being used as rather novel building material and at other times it is not so clear whether there was some element of folk magic being utilised. Philip Armitage has written that the peak of activity for using animal bones as building material is from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries. Features such as knuckle-bone floors and floors made of sheep bones crop up in various places and the floors of some follies and summerhouses were also made of knuckles and bones. Horse teeth were used to repair the floor of Hart's Horn Inn, Ash, Surrey and cattle horn cores were spread out on roads in London and covered in sand to form a 'firm and durable' surface. In these cases there was a readily available supply of animal remains from some nearby food production site and this must have seemed like sensible use of what would otherwise have been a waste product.

In the early modern period (and indeed now for some people) supernatural forces were considered to be very real forces which, with the right knowledge, could be generated, manipulated, projected, absorbed, trapped, reflected and dispelled. This chapter has looked at how cats, horse skulls and a variety of other beasts could be used as part of this belief structure for apotropaic purposes; and a broader contextualisation of such practices will appear later in this book. The author is still collecting examples of these practices so please do get in touch if you have seen any.

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# 7

## Shoes Concealed in Buildings

*June Swann*

With now over sixty years experience of finding worn-out shoes in unusual places, I believe my reactions may be typical of others thus confronted. First, wondering why anyone would place a pair of woman's old shoes under the floorboards. Obviously they had no value, unless sentimental. So could they have been used for hiding cash or valuables? Hardly practical, no value, no use, set the puzzle aside. That was about 1950–51 when there were two finds on show in Northampton Museum, this pair of c.1800, and ten Tudor men's, women's and children's shoes found in a walled-up cupboard by the chimney of a house on London Wall said to have escaped the Great Fire of 1665. These I dismissed as worn out and not worth packing when the family moved.

Later, about 1958, in a discussion of various aspects of shoes with John Thornton, then Head of the Boot and Shoe Department of (the discussion was in my office) the Northampton College of Technology, who collected historic shoes as a teaching aid mentioned having received for identification five or six old shoes, found up chimneys. My response was, 'So have I', and I mentioned a small pair of child's boots (about first-walking size), from the thatched roof of a cottage at Stanwick (Northamptonshire). That pair had a strange effect: I wondered at parents allowing a child so small in such a dangerous place, and whether it was punished for losing them, boots being more expensive than shoes; shoes always claimed a high proportion of the weekly wage, boots rather more. Now we realised that those we had seen could not be accidental losses by chimney sweeps or children, but something deliberate, joining other superstitions involving shoes: bad luck if put on the table (sensible when streets lacked pavements and horses were the main means of transport), and if put on the wrong foot first; tied on the back of a wedding car, and dim recollection of a story that people would throw an old shoe after someone setting out on a journey, for good luck. My reaction was to search in earnest through the extensive section of books on folk practices in Northampton's Library, including J. G. Frazer's multi-volume *The Golden Bough*, but without success; and still nothing found in print until the late 1960s.

## The concealed shoes index

I then decided the only option was to record all I found on index cards, filed alphabetically by county. These were to include address where found; position in building; dates of the building and of alterations where known; brief description of shoes and their dates; associated finds; comments of finders and others involved; and current location. While John Thornton soon decided the practice was restricted to the Midlands and southern Britain, that was soon disproved by two finds from Scotland and another two from North America. Accumulating evidence also indicated that women knew nothing of the practice and were bemused by the husband's insistence either that the shoe must not leave the house, or must be returned immediately; which suggested it might be restricted to male practice. Most people appeared instinctively to put shoes back where they were found, and I rarely pressed anyone to leave them at the Museum, but did accept those they intended to throw away.

## Publication

With Northampton Museum's decision in the late 1960s to publish a *Journal*, to which all curatorial staff were expected to contribute, I rather gladly used the opportunity for a brief paper on what was then known.<sup>1</sup> This covered the area involved; the date range of the shoes (then early fifteenth century to 1935, and a 1964 ceremonial burial of their latest woman's knee boot in foundations for the new Norvic shoe factory in Norwich); also a wide date range in some individual concealments: one of the Stowmarket, Suffolk, chimney finds of three single shoes and a pair of women's (with bowl, spoon and 1669 halfpenny token) ranged from c. 1540 to the late seventeenth century, the latter altered to the style of c. 1720; location in building, some suggesting they were placed during alterations; pairs rare, but occasional 'families': a man's, woman's and various sizes of children's; new shoes even rarer; associated damaged or broken objects, including chicken and other bones; the possibility of deliberate mutilation of shoes and drinking glasses, the stems apparently broken where they lay; several materials for shoes, overshoes (the sole might include cork, wood or iron) and a wooden last (for shoemaking); the range of buildings, from cottages to grand houses, an abbey and an Oxford college; with an appeal for more information. This was followed by eight photographs of boots, shoes and an overshoe (still the largest number published, though six articles in Ericsson and Atzbach's 2005 volume may total more)<sup>2</sup>; ending with the list of then recorded finds. In spite of my assumption I would be informed of articles in obscure journals, the direct response to this was nil.

## Country-wide and international contacts

With the formation of The Costume Society in 1964, followed soon after by others in Scotland, America, Netherlands and Scandinavia, as well as the widening of membership of the International Council of Museums Costume Committee, allowing more than one member per country, it soon became apparent that concealed shoes were not limited to Britain nor Europe, even if, perhaps, to where Europeans settled. Two papers given at the meeting of the Honourable Cordwainers Company in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1994 resulted in the shoemaker at the Plantation being swamped with reports of finds from New England for weeks afterwards. Recent reports from 2004–2005 onwards of a ‘family’ of boots, found in one of three Ptolemaic jars between two mud-brick walls, suggesting a burial, inserted in the Eighteenth Dynasty Amenhotep II marble temple at Luxor, have pushed the practice of placing worn-out footwear in an unusual location back to Greek or Roman times in Egypt 332–330 BC. The jar contained seven boots: a pair of man’s size beside a smaller adult’s, a woman’s, hers crushed by the two pairs of children’s, one pair smaller than the other, thrust into it and bound with string; all in the patched, well-worn condition of later concealed shoes.<sup>3</sup> We hope that Egyptologists will consider the possibility of this connection and report on other examples. In spite of the dozen or so centuries between these and European recorded finds, Ralph Merrifield stressed in the summary chapter of his last major work that after animal remains, a vessel, usually of pottery, acting as a container, is the commonest feature of a ritual deposit.<sup>4</sup> Archaeologists may want to review conclusions on possibly similar finds.

The gap may be partly filled by the official importance of holy relics, preferably of martyrs but, failing that, of saints. This was confirmed by the Second Council of Nicaea in AD 787, which made them essential for the consecration of every church, later with the relics usually installed in, now under, the altar. This suggests the power of tangible objects, and the likelihood, indeed approval of their use for non-religious as well as religious purposes. Bones of birds or animals accompany many concealed shoes, though only five or six included the mummified cat extensively found in unlikely places (‘world-wide’ claimed by Petra Schad).<sup>5</sup>

## Why a shoe?

As well as being three-dimensional when made, the shoe is the only garment we wear which retains our shape, indeed our personality, as long claimed by cobblers mending them. Other garments form a mere heap of cloth when discarded, apart from the moulded hat (fourteen now recorded in shoe concealments, including one containing c. 1830 children’s shoes) and some four, shaped corsets. Over the years a number of people, usually women,

came to the museum to offer a deceased husband's shoes, when they could not face either the thought of disposing of them, or even handling them. It is no coincidence that artists have painted footwear, from Van Gogh's sad boots in the 1880s, via Magritte to Allen Jones in the 1960s and the more recent excess of boots and shoes flaunted everywhere.

### **Materials used for shoes**

Since prehistory the most common have been hides and skins of animals, followed by fish, all cleaned and treated against putrefaction; also wood and plant fibres were used whole or plaited; then felt and woven textiles, later with metal added for reinforcing and protection of both foot and leather. Although known in North America and Europe from at least the sixteenth century, rubber was little used for footwear elsewhere, with a few examples in the late eighteenth century until the more serious development in the nineteenth, when synthetics also began to be made. All these are found in concealed footwear, with iron or brass fittings and, very rarely, metal or ceramic for miniature shoes.

### **Condition of finds**

Almost all the shoes have been worn to the bitter end, beyond further repair or translation, that is discarding the damaged parts and making something else from what was salvaged, a lesson in re-cycling we have yet to revive in volume, though 'refurbished' shoes seem to be available worldwide. Some 'concealed' are so pitiful they must have caused pain to the wearer, revealing thrift and serious poverty in the past, now unusual in the developed world. Beside the cuts to decorate or enlarge a shoe (the latter at throat or back for a bigger foot, and often a cross over corn or bunion, which suggests a second reason), a very few have been deliberately cut, possibly to make unwearable, though one shoe of the seven or so found near the massive chimney in the attic at Hartwell Park, Northamptonshire, with its strong leather upper systematically cut to shreds, suggested venom, perhaps even a curse on the owner as it was done.<sup>6</sup> Less-worn parts of shoes may have pieces cut away for patching, which most families did until the more prosperous time after recovery from the Second World War. Tanned or tawed leather and woven cloth demand specialist craftsmen, hence scraps were saved and re-used until too worn to use again.

### **Whose shoes?**

While both men's and women's shoes are included, the 2014 information of the *Index* shows 29 per cent of finds are children's (down from 40 per cent in 1996 evidence); both include boys and girls, as so many children's shoes

are indistinguishable; followed now by 26 per cent women's, but still with a higher proportion of men's than have been saved in museums' costume collections. The statistics are changed as in the previous sentence, from 40 to 29, because I found 14 per cent were unspecified adults' and about 100, that is 11 per cent, 'families' of shoes. One example, from Brampton, Northamptonshire, suggested father and son, a pattern repeated elsewhere; others possibly mother and daughter or mother and several children. While the shoes chosen reveal poverty, many were made for fashionable, upper class wear, which in the past would normally be handed on to family or friends and then servants until too worn for anything but dirty work. Some boots were made for various trades, with a few army boots. While there is one example of shoes from a known shoemaker's house and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century factory deposits, any suggestion of selecting an appropriate shoe for the building appeared unlikely when the find in a wall of Ely cathedral was described as 'looking like a shoe shop', with at least one woman's shoe too smart for Sunday wear to church.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps with memories of happy times, it would be a sacrifice, like the pair of men's slippers worn by father and son for 62 years, before being given to Northampton Museum by the son's second wife. Thus, assuming that the date of shoes and of concealment were close is hazardous, unless other evidence is to hand. A very high proportion of the records makes no mention of other objects nearby, or it was described as rubbish if I asked (see Associated Finds below). Since I realised that everything around the shoes may be significant, ordinary people find them, take them to museums etc. where very few have ever heard of CS & even fewer researching them. The message is to all: ensure that as much as possible is recorded.

## **The buildings**

No limit is apparent: they are found from city, town and countryside, hovel to palace, school to college, grand administration and other offices, two museums (with the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh's find of a pair of c. 1900 men's balmoral boots under a tall display case believed undisturbed since 1875), Charlie Chaplin's Film Studio and military barracks (a pair of c. 1840 blucher boots under the floor of the military prison at Weedon, Northamptonshire, probably army issue).<sup>8</sup> The list continues with hospital, factory and all sorts of workplace (Wimpey, a national building company, placed a pair of their Dunlop injection-moulded rubber wellingtons as worn on site in the foundations of the Coppergate development in York as a 'time capsule' in 1983). Equally appropriate is the sturdy pair of girl's riveted boots found in a neat brown paper parcel tied with string (as was usual then, before sellotape and plastic) under the floor of the former Simon Collier's boot factory on Harlestone Road, Northampton, built in 1885, typical of their work.<sup>9</sup> Shoes are also found in railway goods yards, and surprisingly, ecclesiastic buildings: monastery, nunnery, church, chapel to cathedral and synagogue.

The following figures are restricted to Britain, though evidence suggests that Europe, North America and Australia may be similar. Apart from 350 recorded under floor and above ceiling where access could have been from above or below, and 120 from unspecified 'walls', the locations chosen within a building seem close to access points: eight doorway, six window, but especially 130 from roof (eaves, rafters, apex, attic or loft); and the most popular, 175 from fireplace-chimney, understandable when the hearth was the centre of the home until later twentieth-century central heating made most rooms habitable in winter. These should be mentioned if the finder describes the find as 'from a wall'; and ask them if internal or external: a shoe from garden or field wall while rarely reported, is known. Equally rare are 'near foundations', though these are less likely to be found during alterations, and the survival rate of textile and leather there is also low. The masonic practice of placing objects under a ceremonial foundation stone does not appear to include a shoe, nor is it mentioned for inclusion in the 'time capsule', suddenly popular in latter years, like the fears of an impending crisis at the new millennium. The only pattern that emerged from the evidence is a possible increase in deposits of shoes dated about the last and first decade of a century, noticeable from 1590s–1625: 42; 1690–1720: 94; 1790–1820: 102 (note: 96 also from 1850s), with decline 1890–1920 to 61. But as all these would be chosen as the 'round' figure when dating objects, and still not reliable for date of concealment, the figures are probably not valid as evidence. Reporting of twentieth-century finds is noticeably slow, partly due to different methods of alterations and demolition. Celebrating the New Year when we look somewhat fearfully into the future might indeed suggest a concealment.

Here a word of warning about the *Index*. It is noticeable that the language used by those reporting finds or asking for information and those recording them is frequently ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, in naming place where found (often uncertain), and inevitably in describing shoes and their dating, not to mention the complicated history of so many buildings other than the newly built. A new workman making his first strange find discards it as of no consequence, unless it appears to have some commercial value. But gradually many if not all obviously suffer from my problem of being unable to face the implications of the first several finds and what may be significant or not. What it does reveal is an amazing parallel, secret world, where no type of building from pig-sty to palace, nor indeed any part of it, is immune to being used in this way.

### Associated finds

Ordinary everyday things here too have a new purpose, revealed by the huge range of objects found both in and alongside the shoes. Ignoring the inevitable mouse or rat (but not those caught in the paws or mouth of a cat, and the three young mice with cat watching, which must have involved

some sort of taxidermy), other animal bones occur. Sheep may have some preference, from bones and even a joint of ribs on a wooden platter, to sheep bell and part of a shepherd's crook. 'Cloven hoof' suggests cattle, along with horn cores and vertebrae; then pig's trotters; deer foot, rabbit foot (said to be lucky in the twentieth century) and hare's skull. Until well after the Second World War restrictions, horses formed a major part of everyday life, providing transport just as the car now dominates lives. To continue Brian Hoggard's evidence, in at least two houses a head was found under the hearth;<sup>10</sup> from various other locations came a bit, noseband, two with whips or spurs and five with parts of harness including leather straps, as well as five with horseshoes, long considered lucky, even preventing lightning strikes. A wooden wheel-hub with spokes implies horse-drawn cart or carriage, generally the more comfortable way to travel, especially during inclement weather.

Then there are birds, especially wings, and at least four finds with chickens, and three with eggs, including a bagful of shells; others with oyster shell, snail and coconut; goose, bat, hawk, pigeon and frog. Given the high proportion of people involved in agriculture and gardening, the importance of seeds and grains is obviously represented: wheat-ear in a shoe and others nearby, oat husks; hazelnuts quite common and a few walnuts, beans, hemp seeds, conkers; even a bunch of sweet-smelling lavender, and another of flowers (perhaps the wedding bouquet?).

Of objects more closely associated with adult and child, the most common is clothing, from head to toe, bits of underwear and outer garments for indoors and out: Dinah Eastop will be considering this next. But the most common after shoes is head wear: hats, caps, bonnets, foundation of wig, lock of hair; followed by gloves and various types of leggings. Next come the tools, the men's not just for building and household jobs, but also for their many trades: wheelwright's plane, thatcher's needle, shoemaker's awl, plumber's punch. For women, the inevitable needle, cotton reel, thimble, sewing bag, lace pattern, three with bobbins and three with spindles for spinning thread. Many finds include scraps of cloth, off-cuts from pattern cutting, others duster size, but also pieces large enough for small garments. With the all-pervasive practice of saving re-usable scraps of woven cloth, these larger pieces could be considered a sacrifice, when still suitable for the final stages, a duster and then rag for dirty work, to be thrown away. Several houses in the Spitalfields area, presumably those involved in the eighteenth-century silk trade, have revealed bundles of silk under floorboards, with at least one top floor room suggesting they made excellent insulation, though perhaps only so deposited when the trade collapsed there in the early nineteenth century. The find under a garret floor in Fournier Street included a 1798 revolutionary list, an 1820s woman's tie shoe, a c. 1840 cravat and a large fragment of an Indian cotton shawl (the competition that caused the silk decline).

House kit, especially brushes, include a broomstick (from a roof, a possible association with a witch?), and crockery: cups, jugs, bowls; wooden platters and bowls; cutlery, with knives and spoons exceeding forks, but also a toasting fork; glass-ware including beer and wine glasses, often appearing deliberately broken when deposited. But these are far exceeded by the number of bottles, of all sizes from tiny phial to wine, including medicine and poison bottles. While 'witch bottles' are said to contain appropriate objects for their purpose, no bottles reported with shoes appear to have had such contents, or indeed anything else.

The impression given is that more than one person might have been involved in the shoe deposit, some indeed suggesting the entire family contributed, as though claiming the building as theirs: Timothy Easton will take these ideas further below. There is a preponderance of containers like the bottles: a leather bottle, costrel and a honey jar. Then there are also a number of purses, bags including for school, another for a tea merchant, a paper bag, the bag of corks; pouches (one for a whetstone), knife sheaths, scabbard, sack, cigarette bin, tins and boxes, including for pills, and a seventeenth-century Delft ointment jar. This recalls the boot used like a container in the story of Sir John Schorne, rector of North Marston church, Buckinghamshire 1290–1314, who was reputed to have conjured the devil into a boot. He is still depicted with saintly halo, holding a knee-high boot, with the devil's head peeping out from the boot top, on the rood screen of three churches: Gately, Cawston and Suffield in Norfolk and another in Sudbury, Suffolk. Sadly he was demoted in the twentieth century, in spite of the miracles claimed for him up to the 1530s. North Marston and the more accessible St Georges Chapel, Windsor, where his remains were transferred with papal authorisation in 1478, attracted huge numbers of pilgrims, with a variety of impressive leaden badges surviving in museums, not to mention six 'Devil in the Boot' pubs in north Buckinghamshire and a discarded sign from the Winslow pub with the same name in Northampton Museum (P.36/1971).

The considerable quantity of paper concealed includes printed and manuscript, parts of books and scraps, many with names and dates, which have not received serious analysis. Sadly the early sixteenth-century objects found in the Mühlberg-Ensemble concealments, Kempten, Germany were divided up to be studied by several specialists, most of whom were more excited about the rarity of so many of the finds to show interest in the reasons for their strange position in the building or their association with the other 'categories'. Birgit Kata, writing about the parchment and paper finds, concludes that some was waste unintentionally put with papers deliberately concealed: almost certainly mistaken; but she does mention that concealments are 'often linked with superstitious, magic conceptions, implying the effect of averting harm'.<sup>11</sup> Those who have seen the perpetual 'posting' of notes between the cracks of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem are familiar

with the idea of depositing paper with messages that certainly would not be described as waste. Like other papers they almost certainly name the person(s) making the concealments, as well as the date, the 1846 chemist's diary being an obvious example. The final conclusion about the Mühlberg-Ensemble that 'quite a number of finds indicate... there was some kind of "scriptorium" ... where documents were drawn up', is in itself significant, as another of the too common attempts to explain the unusual circumstances and avoid acknowledging superstitious practice. This seemed typical of most of the papers at the conference, where authors assumed so much was 'lost' as it fell through cracks in floors, or acted as 'filling materials, sound absorption, thermal insulation'. Likewise the fragments of musical instruments found must have indicated, it is claimed, a turner or stringed-instrument maker's workshop (would the latter make the wind instruments also found there?). The coins, similarly assumed to have fallen through cracks, were miraculously only small change, even though, being dateable they are thus often known to be used by the builder or shipwright to 'date' his work. The wooden fragments were assumed to be mostly left by the builders, although the late medieval window tracery seemed especially unusual for a casual discard, and was thus assumed to have come from the neighbouring church, with no suggestion as to why it was never burnt as firewood, the usual fate of scrap wood. Wooden pegs for heels and cork cushioning for soles came likewise from a shoemaker, though for bits of furniture, platters and children's toys 'the function ... is unclear'. There is no mention of the tally sticks and similar small sticks which seem so prevalent in concealments by the chimney in England, even though they could have been used to light the fire, a daily job in winter. The metal objects were neatly divided into six categories, though whether from one household 'or rubbish of neighbours cannot be answered'. The suggestion that anyone might ask for their neighbours' rubbish seems curious, and surely unlikely.

Finds with other types of paper include about fifteen newspapers, national and local, from the 1714 *Seamen's Monitor* with a child's shoe, and 1829 to the end of the nineteenth century. One also included a dated coal bill, and similar occur with other concealments, together with unspecified bills to 1938. A 1720 calendar, 1850 almanac, List of Deserters from the Press Gang at Langport may mark important events in the life of those making the concealment; also a 1790 election poster for a Lincolnshire man standing for parliament in Northampton (he was not elected); 1832 poster for the Reform Bill, very important for easing poverty then; a quack doctor's leaflet; a scrap with recipe; and a gardening pamphlet. But the most useful, and still the only one of any help in understanding one aspect of the practice, came from the Vestry roof of the Savoy Chapel in London (Museum of London number 58.13): I found a scrap of Victorian wallpaper stamped on the back with part of the 1868–1883 diamond Registration mark. It was folded up in the right of a pair of man's mock-button, elastic

side ankle boots (tied together with string through the back loops used to pull them on, with the back of the heels worn away to the sole, too late for a satisfactory repair, and soiling indicating workman's boots, though probably bought originally as rather stylish Sunday best). It bears the four-line pencil inscription:

Wm Chapman  
 B 3d July 1828  
 this was don  
 in 1876'

The stamped year mark is missing, but the inscription contradicts the Museum of London's previous description that it must have been done during building in 1864 'as there had been no possible access since'. This is presumably another case of depositing a shoe during repairs or modifications, twelve years after the building was completed.

There are also pages from various types of books, with one find including some from French, Latin and English books. The earliest book in the *Index* seems to be 1541. But it also includes a number of ecclesiastical books and other objects: the pedantic 1617 *Supplications of Saints* by Thomas Sorocold; a 1781 Prayer Book with a pair of girl's buckle shoes of perhaps the 1760s,<sup>12</sup> though the style would still be similar to about 1785, all covered with a stone and found near a chimney in Ringwood; what appears to be a lay-preacher's roster of names with an 1806 coin; *Simeon's Collection of Psalms and Hymns* published 1801 – many twentieth century editions found in a bedroom wall in Lincolnshire with a girl's black patent ankle-strap shoe of 1840–1860s; a paper about the Council of Trent; a book of sermons and pages from a Bible which the person making the concealment may have considered the best protection of all. The religious books used by the Jews, whether printed or hand-written, and other religious objects such as prints, Torah binder and tefillin box must never be destroyed. They are to be stored in the genisa of the synagogue, usually situated in the attic or coving over an upper room, to be buried when convenient in a Jewish cemetery. The genisa in Fustat, Cairo, is said to have included about 300,000 text fragments dating from 870 to 1880 when its importance began to be realised, now scattered in university libraries. But research in England and Germany shows that the documents in the genisah there may be accompanied by an old shoe, a knife, clay pipe, top hat or baby's cap, all objects found with concealments of shoes, and in the same worn-out condition. The 1730 synagogue in Veitshöchheim near Würzburg opened as a Jewish Museum in 1994 and since 1998 has cared for and studied the thousands of fragments from its geniza which had survived virtually intact. Bibles, Talmud and prayer books are included from about 1660 to the end of the nineteenth century. But there is also non-religious literature, fiction and poetry translated into Jiddish, dating from

1591 onwards. With such a find, it is not surprising that no other objects are mentioned, for other objects, if they existed, would have seemed irrelevant, unimportant.<sup>13</sup>

I have already mentioned the broken drinking glass found, which some explain as to cut the paws of rats and mice. But there are also other sharp objects: knife, several types of fork, sickle, chisel, nails and needles including packing needle, hatpins, shoemakers' and carpenters' awl, bradawl, pair of compasses, eel spear. Also represented are weapon containers, though not weapons, apart from a noose. Many are associated with heat, fire and light, the most common being clay pipes, easily broken, so readily available and perhaps the most intimate. The fire list continues with candles and candlesticks, lantern, oil lamp for light and matches to light them and the fire in the hearth, coal and charcoal, oven shovel and baker's peel, frying pan, flat iron and shoemakers' finishing irons and wheels, the last three used heated.

## Interpretations

My first article on concealed shoes (in 1969) referred to looking for reasons, as people wanted to know 'why?' As the most recent find then was 1935, it seemed likely there would be some who knew the answer, but the young boy witness of that was denied any explanation. My expectation that they or scholars would respond to my plea for information also produced nothing. Ralph Merrifield's contemporary article, combined with his reconstruction of the find in Museum of London, showed the contents of the bricked-up recess near the first floor fireplace of the Tudor Lauderdale House, Highgate Hill, London. They included four chickens and an egg, which he said had suggested to him that two were alive when bricked in. But as eggs were also reported from other concealments, he soon realised a live chicken was not necessary in the chimney. They were in a large basket, with an earthenware candlestick, a broken glass goblet and two single adult leather shoes: one large, possibly a woman's latchet-tie shoe, its low platform sole wedged at the back, 1590s style; the other a youth's (?) tie shoe of about 1610–1615.<sup>14</sup> An opportunity for closer scrutiny has not yet occurred, though attributing on size alone, as necessary for most shoes of this period, is likely to be equally inconclusive. In his book Merrifield placed them under 'Protection in walls, chimneys and roofs', though perhaps the display is more suggestive of a sacrificial offering, the conclusion I reached in 1969.<sup>15</sup>

The more evidence I have accumulated, the more I feel that Homer's description of sacrifices when the earth was disturbed for a building or a ship set sail on the sea may apply also to our more modest practice. We have lost the affinity with our surroundings as life in towns becomes ever more artificial. There is certainly a hint of both good and evil in what we find,

from the small child's shoe which gives pleasure, to our pity for those who had nothing better to wear on their feet than a derelict shoe. St Birgitta's *Revelations* c. 1370 suggest that one shoe was to remind nuns to amend their sins, and the other, to do good and avoid evil. Concealing shoes is not a religion, even though a 'family' of shoes seemed like some sort of consecration, but we should treat all finds with the same respect shown by those who once concealed them.

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# 8

## Garments Concealed within Buildings: Following the Evidence

*Dinah Eastop*

### Introduction

As June Swann has indicated, the deliberate concealment of garments within the structure of buildings is a long-standing practice; it is seldom well-documented and often characterised as superstitious, i.e. beyond everyday rational beliefs. This paper considers the challenges and outcomes of preserving such garments by introducing the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project (DCGP)<sup>1</sup> and also the insights that conservation may provide for understanding the material culture of practices considered superstitious.<sup>2</sup> The material form of these garments, and the significance attributed to them, change with their concealment, discovery, preservation, dispersal, loss or destruction. As the reasons for concealment are seldom recorded,<sup>3</sup> the practice is open to a wide range of enquiry and speculation, e.g. in studies of archaeology,<sup>4</sup> the history of dress,<sup>5</sup> architectural history<sup>6</sup> and time capsules.<sup>7</sup> Garment finds are not restricted to the UK; caches have been uncovered in mainland Europe, North America and Australia.

Concealments (known as caches, from the French word 'to hide') may consist of a single item or several (and sometimes many) items hidden together. The diversity of objects found together in larger caches is an interesting characteristic of such finds. A cache found in a hop-filled wall cavity in Abingdon<sup>8</sup> consists of a tie-on pocket dated circa 1740, a child's cap dated 1740–1770, fragments of business documents, as well as trade tokens and coins ranging in date from 1573–1577 and 1797.<sup>9</sup> Such assemblages of objects of different dates are not uncommon, making it hard to say when the caches were deposited, or whether a particular cache was deposited at one time or was added to over time. The Winston Cache, documented by Tim Easton,<sup>10</sup> consisted of one sealed deposit and one unsealed deposit, with shoes in the date range of 1680 to 1730.

Caches are important for the history of dress because they have preserved rare examples of every-day wear (boots, shoes and cloth garments). Notable garments include an early seventeenth-century linen doublet found in

Reigate;<sup>11</sup> a pair of seventeenth-century stays (corset) found in Sittingbourne<sup>12</sup> (Figure 8.1); a sixteenth-century felt hat, now at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter; a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century visard, a face mask made of moulded paper and black velvet, found in Daventry,<sup>13</sup> and, a boy's wool doublet, dated to the early seventeenth century and found in Abingdon.<sup>14</sup> The tie-on pocket from the Abingdon Cache mentioned above is a rare survival of eighteenth-century women's wear. The pocket is of a once very common type, made from a cheap printed fabric; many finely worked and embroidered examples are preserved in museums, but very few of this once-common sort have survived.<sup>15</sup>

Research has shown that a recently reported find, the fragmentary remains of a man's coat, recorded by the DCGP as the Maldon Cache, is historically significant. The thread-wrapped buttons of the centre-front opening are of a previously unrecorded form. The coat is typical of many garments found concealed within buildings in showing signs of heavy use, with fabrics stretched, creased and worn. Repairs and alterations are also common features. In the case of the Maldon Cache coat, the left sleeve is missing, and the right sleeve has been enlarged by the insertion



*Figure 8.1* The rare pair of seventeenth-century stays (corset) found in the Sittingbourne Cache. Image Credit: Textile Conservation Foundation

of a large gusset-like panel. The cuff of wool plush fabric is a much later addition.<sup>16</sup>

### The vulnerability of finds

The rarity of early modern garments is matched by their vulnerability to loss or damage resulting from the circumstances of their concealment and discovery. Caches are seldom uncovered during systematic architectural excavations; notable exceptions include some finds in Germany, e.g. the Mühlberg Ensemble,<sup>17</sup> and in Australia, e.g. the Eynesbury Cache. In the UK caches are usually uncovered by chance, e.g. during building work, and so are seldom documented thoroughly and the precise location of finds (or any material that may have been present, e.g. leaves, flowers) are seldom recorded. The Little Ickfield Cache (a child's waistcoat and the right leg of a child's breeches) provides a useful example of discovery, reporting and retention. The cache was uncovered after a fire in the thatched roof of a timber-framed house (originally built as three labourers' cottages in c. 1525). In order to contain the fire, the firefighters cut a fire-break in the thatched roof and the thatch was raked off into the front garden and sprayed with water. The garments were found in the removed thatch by a firefighter who alerted the home-owner. Records state that the discovery was reported shortly afterwards in the local newspaper, *'Bucks Herald, Thursday 20 May 1993, p. 1'*. The finds were retained in the house, and were later passed to the new owners of the property.

Garment finds, like the breeches found in the thatch, are often fragmentary. They are usually creased, soiled and easily mistaken for rags, particularly when mixed with building debris. The early seventeenth-century linen doublet found in the Reigate Cache was nearly thrown away; it was only saved from destruction because someone saw the worked buttonholes amongst the builder's rubble and recognised the rags as a garment.<sup>18</sup> The damaged state of many garment finds arises not only from the locations of concealment and the circumstances of discovery, but also by the garments' treatment prior to concealment. Garments found in caches often show signs of heavy wear, as seen in the discolouration, distortions and worn edges of the stays shown in Figure 8.1. It appears that worn garments were often selected for concealment, perhaps because a worn garment retains the form of the wearer's body.<sup>19</sup> Several garments found in caches also appear to have been deliberately damaged before being hidden, perhaps to ensure they would not be returned to everyday use.<sup>20</sup>

The poor condition of garment finds can facilitate certain forms of research by enabling documentation and investigation of normally hidden materials or details of construction. In the case of the eighteenth-century stomacher found in the Nether Wallop Cache, its extremely damaged state meant that it was easy to see and sample its baleen ('whalebone') stiffening

strips. This made possible DNA analysis of a piece of the baleen removed from the stomacher and led to the identification of its source as a North Atlantic Right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) from a previously unrecorded mitochondrial lineage of this species.<sup>21</sup>

The condition of finds is not the only influential factor in their conservation. A cache containing a garment may contain other kinds of objects and this diversity can inhibit preservation. The Brixham Cache, found in two places within the walls of a cross passage of a fourteenth-century timber-framed house in Devon, included the fragmentary remains of a pair of breeches (probably of seventeenth-century date) and a heavily worn apron-like cloth, tied together with straw when found. The other finds were: a broken ox-shoe, a fish hook and line, scraps of leather and cloth, an animal bone (shoulder blade), a marble and a key. Such a diversity of object types can be challenging to a museum's typological categories and expertise. The animal bone may fit with natural history, while the garments fit with dress and the ox-shoe with rural life. Finds may also be classified as archaeological, as was the case at Hampshire County Council Museums and Archives Service, where the Keeper of Archaeology was responsible for local cache finds, including the two baby's shoes which constituted the Hursley Cache, found behind the brick chimney stack in a timber-framed, thatched cottage in Hampshire.

Preservation challenges are further complicated by the views of collectors and the practices of museum acquisition which can result in selective documentation and preservation. Partial retention of finds is not uncommon; finders may retain only those things that interest them, and collecting policies may mean that museum staff can only acquire parts of a cache, e.g. those items known to be produced locally. The protective (apotropaic) function attributed to some finds<sup>22</sup> means they are quickly re-concealed<sup>23</sup> while others may be destroyed because the finder thinks they are of no interest; a shoe and a 'corset type thing' were destroyed by the house-owner, thinking there was no significance to them.

### **The deliberately concealed garments project**

The particular challenges of conserving garment finds led the author to establish the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project (DCGP) in 1998 at the Textile Conservation Centre, University of Southampton, UK. The DCGP built on the pioneering work of June Swann,<sup>24</sup> who started an index of boots and shoes found within buildings. The DCGP complements the *Index of Concealed Shoes*, which is held at Northampton Museum with its nationally important *Footwear Collection*. The aim of the DCGP is to facilitate the preservation of finds and to record information about caches and concealment practices. As a preservation strategy, the DCGP extends the boundaries of preventive and remedial textile conservation (e.g. the treatment of individual objects) to include the collection of data about finds,

recording oral history accounts of recent discoveries, and promoting public understanding of the finds' significance.

Raising public awareness of caches and the historical significance of finds was achieved via media coverage, e.g. an article for the Society for the Protection of Buildings,<sup>25</sup> and via the project website and an exhibition called *Hidden House History*, which toured museums in Hampshire and Dorset.<sup>26</sup> Recording finds remains a priority. Finders, owners and museum staff are encouraged to report finds via the on-line 'Report a Find' forms available on the DCGP site. Each cache is given a name which records the location of the cache site, e.g. the Hursley Cache was found in Hursley, Hampshire. This naming convention allows localities to be mapped while maintaining privacy; this is important as many reported caches were found in private homes. When several caches are found in the same village or town, they are numbered, e.g. Abingdon Cache 1, Abingdon Cache 2. An oral history programme was instigated; several finders described the circumstances and experience of discovering a cache.<sup>27</sup> As well as including extracts of the oral history transcripts, the website provides details of related publications and advice on what to do if you find a cache.

The DCGP's preservation strategy involved the creation of a 'virtual collection' of garment finds on the project's website ([www.concealedgarments.org](http://www.concealedgarments.org)). As noted above, what happens to a cache varies according to the circumstances of its discovery; some finds are retained by the finder or the owner of the building in which they were found;<sup>28</sup> items may also be donated or lent to museums. Museums may not collect the whole cache, choosing instead to retain parts considered significant for their collections. As a result it can be difficult to obtain a clear picture of when and where caches have been found. A database of caches was therefore established as part of the DCGP and forms the basis for a 'virtual collection' of finds, enabling a mass of recorded but dispersed, re-hidden, lost or destroyed finds to be brought together.<sup>29</sup>

The Cuckfield Cache provides a good example of the way finds can be dispersed. When attic floorboards were lifted during house repairs, a mass of material was found between the joists, including garments, metal implements, glass bottles, children's bricks and a school exercise book. The builders removed the finds and displayed them outside, where they were noticed and photographed by an interested passer-by. By the time the cache was reported to the house-owner, the bottles were no longer present; at a later stage, the corset was thrown away as it was considered too damaged to be of interest. A virtual collection resonates with concealment practices because neither depends on physical encounters with what's hidden. For the person who conceals, the lack of notes to finders suggests that the object is meant to remain inaccessible and untouched.<sup>30</sup>

The DCGP capitalises on the dissociation between the representations on the website and the real things. This dissociation enables continuing

public access to finds while enabling them to remain in their concealed (and thereby maintain any function attributed to them via concealment).<sup>31</sup> It also allows the digital and material objects to follow different trajectories. Information on significant objects, sites and practices can be retained while the objects continue to be used by their owners/custodians. In this way the DCGP acknowledges the protective power attributed by some finders to these objects.

As noted above, the DCGP was initiated at the Textile Conservation Centre (TCC). The initial focus of the project and its title reflect the type of object brought to the TCC for conservation and advice. It soon became apparent that garment finds were sometimes discovered with other things, such as bottles, bones and plant material. The recording of whole caches and cache sites is considered very important and although textiles and dress remain the main focus of the DCGP, 'whole cache' documentation is carried out. A similar disciplinary focus is seen in the *Index of Concealed Shoes* at Northampton, where the initial focus and subject expertise is reflected in its title, even though non-footwear finds are recorded in the *Index*. In this sense both projects reflect the working of typological classification and the tendency to prioritise certain types of data collection over others. Re-launching the DCGP would provide an opportunity for a more inclusive title, reflecting the diversity of reported finds and the importance of their architectural context.

Cache finds also highlight how categorisation and significance assessment affects what is preserved and how it is preserved. This is shown to depend on what the cache finders, curators and conservators consider is significant. From the records in the *Index of Concealed Shoes* and of the DCGP it is clear that finds are viewed in three main ways: as rubbish (trash); as material evidence of the past; and/or, as material evidence of beliefs (both past and present). The challenges of conserving such garments demonstrate the importance of contemporary beliefs and assumptions because they affect the recognition, reporting, documentation and retention of finds. What is preserved (and how it is preserved) depends on what cache finders (and sometimes curators) think is significant. Some finders and the residents of houses in which caches have been discovered attribute agency to the finds as protective agents (as bringers of good luck or averters of bad luck) and may insist that finds be re-hidden<sup>32</sup> or that substitutes are found to replace removed items – just in case!

Conservation measures tend to prioritise one aspect for preservation, e.g. evidence of the object as originally produced, or evidence of an object's long use as a garment, or evidence of its use in a cache.<sup>33</sup> Minimal intervention and the making of a replica was the approach taken for the doublets in the Reigate Cache and in Abingdon Cache 1. This approach was adopted in order to preserve evidence of each garment as a concealment, while allowing the presumed original form of the doublets to be presented by means of the

replicas. A more interventionist treatment was adopted for the eighteenth-century tie-on pocket mentioned above, with preservation of evidence of the pocket's presumed original form and use as a garment prioritised over evidence of its later use in a cache. The pocket was wet-cleaned, re-shaped and supported so it could be exhibited in way that showed it closer to its 'as new' appearance, rather than being exhibited in its soiled, creased 'as found in the cache' condition. In this way the preservation strategy prioritised one phase of the pocket's 'life' (a garment as worn) over a later phase (as a garment hidden in a cache).

### **Making sense of concealments**

Garments found concealed within the fabric of buildings do not appear to have a structural purpose (though a few may have blocked holes or draughts, and some may have been unintentional deposits),<sup>34</sup> and therefore other explanations have been investigated. The lack of contemporaneous recording or commentary appears (once again) to be a feature of the practice and so the reasons for past concealments are largely unknown.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the people who assembled caches were unable to read or write, or considered it unnecessary to record this aspect of their lives. Concealment may have been something you did, but did not talk about. It is also possible that the makers of caches believed that the efficacy of any protection offered by concealments would be put at risk if the cache was recorded.<sup>36</sup> Concealments have also (as said before) been considered when analysing 'time capsules'.<sup>37</sup> but the expectation of, and preparation for, later discovery is a distinctive feature of 'time capsules' whereas only a few garments finds have included notes to finders.<sup>38</sup> Whatever the reasons for concealment, caches are likely to be the outcomes of several different, concurrent traditions. Explanations have been sought through various types of research, with several lines of enquiry, including: analysis of their locations; metonymical and metaphorical analysis based the associations of their physical attributes; and the significance attributed to them by finders.

June Swann has described the results of her first detailed spatial analysis of garment caches in her study of boots and shoes found concealed within buildings. An analysis of eighty finds reported to the DCGP produced similar results.<sup>39</sup> Location had not been recorded in 36 per cent of the cases; 25 per cent were found in voids (three in ovens, eight by stairs and ten under floorboards); 20 per cent were found in attics or roofs; and three (approximately 4 per cent) were found within walls. If the caches found in ovens are grouped with chimney and fireplace finds (rather than with voids) the number of finds in each category is eighteen and nineteen (just under 25 per cent for each category). In summary, common sites for concealment are: near doorways, window openings, chimneys and in voids (e.g. blocked-up bread ovens). They are also found at the junction of old and new parts of a

building, which may explain finds near chimneys, often additions to earlier buildings. All this concurs with the find places for the other classes of object considered in this book.

A preliminary categorisation of finds reported to the DCGP was based largely on physical characteristics,<sup>40</sup> as listed below. Some finds can be placed in several categories, highlighting the arbitrary nature of the eight categories selected: bearing evidence of humans, e.g. signs of wear; being made of resistant materials, e.g. metal, pointed, sharp; having the ability to hold firm or secure, or to hold attention, e.g. belt, padlock, spindle; could serve as human substitute, e.g. animal bone or skeleton; able to burn and/or create light, e.g. smoking pipe; having potential for growth, e.g. seeds; serving as a dating device, e.g. dated newspaper; and, miscellaneous, e.g. puncture repair kit, where its tightly-fitting lid, confined space and capacity to seal holes may have been significant. In retrospect, it is clear that these categories were influenced by the malice-averting explanations of concealment practices.

As most garments reported to the DCGP show signs of heavy use, the intimate association of wearer and garment may have been significant in concealment practices. Cloth and leather can retain the imprint of the wearer and could be understood to 'stand in for the person'.<sup>41</sup> A metonymical link can be made when a garment, understood as a symbolic part of the wearer, comes to represent the person who wore it, as in the case of textile relics. Analysis of the Draycott Cache, a mid-nineteenth-century bodice found in Derbyshire, has linked concealment practices with the medieval belief in the power of textiles, as both protective and destructive.<sup>42</sup> Whether a garment in a cache served as a metonym of the wearer is not known, but June Swann's 'families' of shoes suggest that this might have been the case.

Metaphorical associations between home and the body are widespread; the 'hearth being the heart of the home' is one example. By a process of metaphoric entailment, the concealing of garments may have been understood as a way of clothing (and thereby protecting) the body of the home. The ontological and epistemic correspondences for such entailment are via the shared capacities of containing and protecting. The former relies on a correspondence of form or feature (provided by the container-like properties shared by body, garment and house). The latter draws on correspondence of knowledge (that a garment protects a body, and a house protects its inhabitants). The choice of used or purposely damaged garments to occupy voids in buildings may have been understood to give these objects power beyond that attributed to them in everyday experience.<sup>43</sup>

As noted above, the DCGP includes an oral history programme. This was initiated as a means of understanding more about the circumstances of discovery and concealment, and to learn more about the views of finders, custodians and conservators. Six recordings relating to four caches were made and are held by Wessex Film and Sound Archive, Winchester UK, where

they are publicly accessible. Details of one recording have been published.<sup>44</sup> Phil Talbot (Figure 8.2) describes the discovery of the Sittingbourne Cache, the collective name given to hundreds of artefacts found within the structure of an old public house in Sittingbourne, Kent, shortly before the building's demolition. He said:

[W]e knew there was a hole in the lath and plaster...at the side of the fireplace... [Figure 8.3 shows the chimney flue shortly before demolition.] We were working by torchlight; it was very difficult to see; we did have visions originally of trying to collate the stuff as we found it but it ended up being so much we were just putting it into carrier bags...it was just so amazing...I mean we started finding the shoe and then something else would come up and the shout would go out. This voice would just be heard in the darkness by everybody else saying 'we've got another shoe, a hat', or 'we've got a pair of gloves' or something...we were just so enthralled with what we were finding that nobody complained of being cold or dirty or wet or hungry...we realised that time was running out [because demolition of the building was imminent].<sup>45</sup>



*Figure 8.2* Finders Phil Talbot (L), holding a bag of small finds from the Sittingbourne Cache, and Alan Abbey. Image Credit: Textile Conservation Foundation



*Figure 8.3* Demolition of the fireplace and chimney flue, alongside which much of the Sittingbourne Cache was discovered. Image Credit: Textile Conservation Foundation

Phil Talbot's account provides valuable information about the working conditions and the locations of the different groups of finds. It also conveys the intense experience of discovery: 'you know, I mean excitement doesn't really cover it; it was just a...that feeling of, you know, well I suppose a mixture of excitement, euphoria'.<sup>46</sup>

Concealment practices continue in the present and can inform understanding of current relationships between people and the spaces they occupy, and the meanings attributed to acts of concealment.<sup>47</sup> Finders of caches seek explanations for what they have discovered. Local reporting is important, and as shown above, many finders demonstrate an intense excitement at their discovery and a keen interest in what they've found. Some pass on finds, or information about finds, to the house-owner or to other custodians. From the evidence of the DCGP, finds are rarely retained by house-owners when they move, rather they are left in the care of the new owners, as with the Hockliffe Cache noted below.

Finders may become concealers when they replace finds with a substitute or re-conceal a cache they have uncovered. When a finder becomes a

concealer the reason given is usually to maintain a positive effect and/or a presumed tradition of concealment (and perhaps of re-concealment). There is often a presumption of past beliefs in the protective function of caches. They may be linked to foundation sacrifices, and thereby to Masonic practice. Goethe's novel of 1809, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* ('Elective Affinities'), describes a mason laying a foundation stone. He knows his work will be concealed by the later work of decorators, and he makes the foundation stone into a memorial by incorporating curious things, e.g. bottles and newly minted coins. He invited any spectator who felt inclined 'to make over something to posterity ... but as is usually the case ... nobody was prepared';<sup>48</sup> an army officer offered two buttons from his uniform, and 'other fine articles were likewise sacrificed'.<sup>49</sup> The work of the mason is linked with the Brixham Cache, as a mason/builder was thought to have lived in the house, and one of the finds was an apron of robust cloth, perhaps a mason's apron of the functional rather than ritual type. The Sittingbourne Cache also has masonic associations. The public house where it was uncovered is believed to have served as the earliest Masonic Lodge in Sittingbourne; finds included broken clay pipes with masonic emblems and a 'freemason's skillet'. The floor in one room had a distinctive feature: floorboards were cut so they could be lifted to create a grave-like space. Finders associated this space with a masonic ritual of burial and rebirth.<sup>50</sup>

Concealed garments may be linked to other apotropaic practices identified in this book, such as the marking of buildings, and the burial of 'witch-bottles' and animal bones, and the immurement of cats. These actions have been understood to offer protection by disabling or acting as a decoy to divert malevolent forces which might enter via doors, windows and chimneys. The records of a cache found in Hockcliffe, Bedfordshire are interesting for what they tell us about concealment practices and how they are recorded and interpreted. Records at Luton Museum state that a reversible, linen smock was found with other objects, on the 15 March 1947, in the roof space of a house. The smock had apparently been stored in a basket, but only the lid was found, wedged between the chimney stack and the cottage wall. The smock was folded and one sleeve loosely tied with twine at the wrist and a little higher up, so as to secure a packet inside the sleeve. This packet, wrapped in flannel, included four broadsheets concerning Caroline of Brunswick (1768–1821), a scythe wedge, a button hook, a key, a medicine bottle and a carnelian. The museum records state that: 'These may have been preserved for a superstitious reason, and a parallel case is recorded at Clapham, Beds, in *Bedfordshire Notes and Queries*, 1893'. This find is itemised as 10, BL/36/48, in a list of smocks at Luton Museum. In terms of categories noted above, its location fits the roof category, and the cache contains a characteristic range of objects, including resistant materials and dating devices. It is also noteworthy that superstition is proposed as a possible reason for the cache, making reference to an earlier published example. It is

not unusual for possible explanations to be repeated and so become part of the folklore of concealment practices; Alan Abbey provides an example in his article in *Kent Archaeology*.<sup>51</sup>

Belief in the capacity of concealed objects to divert or capture malevolent forces is consistent with Gell's analysis of the technology of enchantment<sup>52</sup> and the agency attributed to objects.<sup>53</sup> Gell argues that agency is what is *perceived* as intentional consequence: 'Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an "intention" lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of agency.'<sup>54</sup> He argues that the efficacy of volt sorcery and idol worship can be explained in terms of distributed agency, where objects are understood to act as agents.<sup>55</sup> Garments concealed within the structure of buildings may have been understood, and may continue to be understood, to have this sort of agency. Beliefs in the agency of object are not uncommon, and an analogous practice involving objects as active agents in protecting property is analysed in the evocatively named book *Vigilant Objects*.<sup>56</sup>

Volt sorcery is a form of imitative sympathetic magic, in which harm done to a representation of the victim is suffered by the victim: 'the image of the prototype [victim] is bound to, or fixed and imprisoned within, the index [victim's image]'.<sup>57</sup> In Gell's terms, the wearer (the prototype) generates an image (in this case, a garment which bears the signs of wear); the garment could be understood to serve as an 'image of the prototype, and as the index as a (detached) part of the prototype'.<sup>58</sup> In this way the garment could be understood as a decoy, which exercises a causal effect by drawing malevolent attention to the garment and distracting it from the prototype. The effectiveness of such sorcery would draw on both imitative magic based on similarity (of size and shape in the case of garments) and on that based on contact (of the wearer with the garment). In summary, garment finds may have been understood to exploit and redirect imitative and contact sorcery.<sup>59</sup>

Accounts of the discovery and re-concealment of finds are revealing about practices and beliefs that might be viewed as superstitious. One account from Cookham, Berkshire relates to the discovery (and re-concealment) of shoes in a 700-year old house, reported as having a welcoming feel. 'I don't think what I did [re-concealed shoe finds] was a superstitious reaction... I think it was more an act of deference to the beliefs of the person who put the shoes there... Perhaps there was also some element of taking no risk of upsetting the existing equilibrium [the good atmosphere of the house]'.<sup>60</sup> A similarly cautious approach is suggested by the insistence of the tenant's wife to board-up the cache of footwear uncovered in a house on the Colby Estate in Pembrokeshire.<sup>61</sup>

Garments found in caches demonstrate how their material form and the significance attributed to them changes with their concealment, discovery and conservation. The categorisation of finds affects whether or not they are

collected and preserved; the assessment of their significance affects what is preserved and how it is preserved. When objects are understood as having emergent histories,<sup>62</sup> cache finds can illuminate questions of history-making and material culture,<sup>63</sup> and also contemporary understanding of practices characterised by some as superstitious. At each stage of their history, their social use relates to the significance attributed to them at that time. The anomalous character of these garments may help to explain the power they are sometimes attributed; the power of ambiguities within a classificatory system is widely recognised, e.g. in the field of anthropology.<sup>64</sup> Whatever the reasons, these historic garments continue to have a role today, whether valued as historical specimens, as archaeological evidence, as exhibits or as protective agents. They provide vivid examples of the inter-relationship between the past and the present, and beliefs about the past manifested in explanations given to actions in the present. This explanation provides a narrative of self-generating tradition, based on available material 'evidence' and beliefs about the past, which is personally selected and sustained in action. In the case of these garments, 'magic' or 'superstition' is generated in the present. This processual view of the practice of concealing garments within the fabric of buildings can be summed up as providing a study of present views of the past enacted in the present.

## Notes

1. The Deliberately Concealed Garments Project would not have been possible without the support of the L. J. and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (and its predecessor the AHRB), and the custodians of finds. The touring exhibition *Hidden House History* benefited from the support of Hampshire County Council Museums and Archives Service, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Hampshire County Council. The oral history recordings were supported by the Wessex Film and Sound Archive.
2. Dinah Eastop and Charlotte Dew, 'Context and Meaning Generation: The Conservation of Garments Deliberately Concealed within Buildings', in Saunders, D., Townsend, J. H. and Woodcock, S. (eds) *The Object in Context: Crossing Conservation Boundaries*. Preprints of the Biennial Congress of IIC, Munich, 2006 (London, 2006), 7–22.
3. Tim Easton, 'Spiritual Middens', in Oliver, P. (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, Vol. 1. (Cambridge, 1995), 568.
4. Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London, 1987).
5. June Swann, 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', *Northampton County Borough Museums and Art Gallery Journal*, 6 (1969), 8–21; June Swann, 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', *Costume: The Journal of the [UK] Costume Society*, 30 (1996), 56–69; Ilse von Fingerlin, 'Seltene Textilien aus Kloster Alpirsbach in Nordschwarzwald', *Waffen und Kostümkunde*, 39 (1997), 99–122.
6. Tim Easton, 'Spiritual Middens'.
7. Brian Durrans, *Presents to the Future? Opening up Time Capsules* [Working title] (London, forthcoming).

8. Anna Harrison and Kathryn Gill, 'An Eighteenth-Century Detachable Pocket and Baby's Cap, Found Concealed in a Wall Cavity: Conservation and Research', *Textile History*, 33 (2002), 177–194.
9. The cache is part of the Reserve Collections of the Oxfordshire Museum Service.
10. Easton, 'Spiritual Middens'.
11. Susan Stanton, 'A Seventeenth-Century Linen Doublet: The Development of a Strategy for the Documentation, Preservation and Display of a Rare Item of Working Class Dress'. Unpublished Diploma Report, Courtauld Institute of Art/Textile Conservation Centre (London, 1995).
12. Dinah Eastop, 'Sound Recording and Text Creation: Oral History and the Deliberately Concealed Garments Project', in Hayward, M. and Kramer, E. (eds), *Textiles and Text: Re-establishing the Links Between Archival and Object-Based Research*. Post-prints of the Third AHRC Research Centre for Textile Conservation and Textile Studies Conference, 2006 (London, 2007), 65–70.
13. 'Object type: Mask; Broad period: Post Medieval; County: Northamptonshire', *Portable Antiquities Scheme* (Record ID: NARC-151A67), at: [finds.org.uk/database/search/results/q/vizard](https://finds.org.uk/database/search/results/q/vizard). Accessed 31 December 2014; 'Mask', *Portable Antiquities Scheme* (Record ID: NARC-151A67), at: [finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/402520](https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/402520). Accessed 31 December 2014; 'An Amazing Find of an Elizabethan "Visard" Mask', *Fashioning the Early Modern: Creativity and Innovation in Europe, 1500–1800* (n.d.), at: [www.fashioningtheearlymodern.ac.uk/object-in-focus/visard-mask](http://www.fashioningtheearlymodern.ac.uk/object-in-focus/visard-mask). Accessed 31 December 2014.
14. Maria Hayward, 'A Shadow of a Former Self: Analysis of an Early Seventeenth Century Boy's Doublet from Abingdon', in Hamling, T. and Richardson, C. (eds), *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and Its Meanings*. (Aldershot, 2010), 107–118.
15. Barbara Burman and Seth Denbo, *Pockets of History: The Secret Life of an Everyday Object* (Bath, 2007).
16. Kathryn Gill, 'Sharing Evidence: Documentation, Conservation and Replication of a Man's Wool Coat with Thread-Wrapped Buttons', *Textile. Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 13 (1) 4–29.
17. Rainer Atzbach, 'The Concealed Finds from the Mühlberg-Ensemble in Kempten (Southern Germany): Post-Medieval Archaeology on the Second Floor,' *Post-medieval Archaeology*, 46 (2012), 252–280.
18. Susan Stanton, *A Seventeenth-Century Linen Doublet*.
19. Swann, 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings' (1996).
20. Miriam Duffield, 'Interpreting Evidence of Wear and Deliberate Damage in Four Deliberately Concealed Garments'. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation, University of Southampton (Southampton, 2004).
21. Dinah Eastop and Ross McEwing, 'Informing Textile and Wildlife Conservation: DNA Analysis of Baleen from an Eighteenth Century Garment Found Deliberately Concealed in a Building', in Janaway, R. and Wyeth, P. (eds), *Scientific Analysis of Ancient and Historic Textiles: Informing Preservation, Display and Interpretation*. Post-prints of the First AHRC Research Centre for Textile Conservation and Textile Studies Conference, 2004 (London, 2005), 161–167.
22. Easton, 'Spiritual Middens'.
23. Emily Brooks, 'Watch Your Step; A Tale of 'Builders' Sacrifice' and Lost Soles', *The National Trust Magazine*, 91 (2000), 67–68.
24. Swann, 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', (1969).

25. Charlotte Dew and Dinah Eastop, 'Hide and Seek', *SPAB News*, 24(3) (2003), 22–23.
26. The exhibition toured seven venues in Hampshire and Dorset between July 2005 and the end of 2006: Havant Museum; Andover Museum; Red House Museum and Gardens, Christchurch; Eastleigh Museum; Westbury Manor Museum, Fareham; Willis Museum, Basingstoke; and Aldershot Military Museum.
27. Eastop, 'Sound Recording and Text Creation'.
28. The Abingdon doublet is displayed in the house where it was found: 26a East St Helen Street, Abingdon; the house and doublet are in the care of the Oxford Preservation Trust.
29. Eastop and Dew, 'Context and Meaning Generation'.
30. Anna E. Bülow and Dinah Eastop, 'Cultural Heritage Online: Questions of Authenticity, Authority and Authorship', in Gordon, R., Hermens, E. and Lennard, F. (eds) *Authenticity and Replication: The 'Real Thing' in Art and Conservation* (London, 2014), 204–214.
31. For a short presentation by Dinah Eastop on 'Material Culture in a Digital World', see the podcast of the Gerald Aylmer seminar 2013 (second page), *History SPOT*, at: [historyspot.org.uk/podcasts/gerald-aylmer-seminar-2013-why-material-culture](http://historyspot.org.uk/podcasts/gerald-aylmer-seminar-2013-why-material-culture). [Accessed 31 December 2014]
32. Brooks, 'Watch your Step'.
33. Eastop and Dew, 'Context and Meaning Generation'.
34. A wallet, thought to have been mislaid on a train in 1974, was recently reported to have been found in the ceiling of the owner's old office; the discovery was made during building work to convert the office building into flats: Anon. 'My wallet's turned up ... after 40 years. *Metro* [free newspaper] (London, Friday 17 January 2014), 11.
35. Tim Easton distinguishes 'spiritual middens' from 'builder's deposits'; based on evidence from builders working in small family firms in the 1950s, he reports that the latter was a tradition passed from father to son, and kept secret from customers and their own labourers.
36. J. B. Smith, "'Pot-lid" and "Jack in the Cellar" : The Unborn Child in Saying, Custom and Artefact." *Folk Life – Journal of Ethnological Studies*, 37 (1998), 92–98.
37. Brian Durrans, *Presents to the Future?*
38. June Swann refers to one example in 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', (1996), 59.
39. Dinah Eastop and Charlotte Dew, 'Secret Agents: Deliberately Concealed Garments as Symbolic Textiles', in Vuori, J. (compiler) *Tales in the Textile. The Conservation of Flags and other Symbolic Textiles*. Preprints of the North American Textile Conservation Conference 2003 (Albany, 2003), 5–15.
40. Eastop and Dew, 'Secret Agents', 10–11.
41. Swann, 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', (1996), 56.
42. Sarah Randles, 'Material Magic: The Deliberate Concealment of Footwear and Other Clothing', *Paragon. Journal of Australian and New Zealand Early Modern Studies* [Special Issue on Magic], 30 (2013), 109–128.
43. Eastop, 'Outside in', 247–249
44. Eastop, 'Sound Recording and Text Creation'.
45. Eastop, 'Sound Recording and Text Creation', 66.
46. Eastop, 'Sound Recording and Text Creation', 67–68.
47. Eastop, 'Outside in', 238–255.

48. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wahlverwandtschaften*, 1809. Translated as *Elective Affinities*, with an introduction and notes by David Constantine (Oxford, 1994), 60.
49. Goethe, *Elective Affinities*, 60.
50. Alan Abbey, 'Concealed Garments', *Kent Archaeological Society Newsletter*, 64 (Spring 2005), 14–15, at: [www.kentarchaeology.org.uk](http://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk)
51. Abbey, 'Concealed Garments'.
52. Alfred Gell, 'Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', in Coote, J. and Shelton, A. (eds) *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics* (Oxford, 1992), 40–66.
53. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).
54. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 17.
55. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 102 and 133.
56. David T. Doris, *Vigilant Things. On Thieves, Yoruba Anti-Aesthetics, and the Strange Fates of Ordinary Objects in Nigeria* (Seattle, 2011).
57. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 102.
58. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 104.
59. Gell, *Art and Agency*, 103.
60. DCGP: Email of 25 March 2007.
61. Brooks, 'Watch Your Step'.
62. Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process' in Appadurai, A. (ed.) *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 64–91.
63. Dinah Eastop, 'History-Making and the Conservation of Garments Concealed within Buildings', in Hamling, T. and Richardson, C. (eds) *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and Its Meanings* (Aldershot, 2010), 145–156.
64. Mary Douglas, 'Understanding the rRules of dDefilement', *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), Chapter 2.

# 9

## Spiritual Middens

*Timothy Easton*

That objects were deliberately concealed in post-medieval English buildings as part of a secular folk ritual is clearly one of the central arguments of this book. Mostly, as has been made clear, those finds comprised small groups of personal artefacts hidden behind walls, under floors and in thatch roofs. These are defined here as *ritual concealments*. Less attention has been paid by researchers to the much larger collections found in specific voids, usually near chimneys. In most cases these voids, which effectively became shafts down to the floor below, were not sealed over at the top end, and so continued to be available for receiving much larger numbers of redundant personal objects over the years. These are defined as *spiritual middens*. The examination of these bigger assemblages has given greater opportunities for analysis. Once they have been recorded during excavation, the objects from each can be grouped to consider specific ways in which they might have allayed the household's fears of possible misfortunes. Because to date there is no historical record of this practice or the motivation involved, these collections give us our best chance to try understand certain aspects of the lives and fears of the former inhabitants of some historic houses.

### Descriptions

The term *spiritual midden* was used first by me at a London conference in 1989 to describe a specific type of location within houses that received personal objects for spiritual reasons over a period of time.<sup>1</sup> *Ritual middens* might have been an alternative term to describe them. This definition was applied to the empty spaces close to chimneys which, in general, were regularly accessed from the upper level so that objects could be added over weeks or many years. This term was not intended to cover other places around the house where similar artefacts were secreted behind walls and under floors, usually as a single event, although a few will be used here to illuminate comparable motivations for such practices. When analysing the ritual middens from the early nineteenth century onwards, it becomes clear that

they are not all the same. For example, some of the voids next to chimneystacks were left open, as *spiritual middens* whilst others were definitely closed as one-off depositions becoming *ritual concealments*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Contents, and difficulties of evidence**

It is clear that nearly all the discarded objects consigned to each shaft were worn out, broken or past their usefulness, so the void was being treated like an internal midden over time by the occupants rather than the builders. It is also evident that in most cases, given the effort of ascending two flights of stairs into attics or roof voids each time to deposit the discarded items, there must have been an overriding need, a strong ritual motivation. In those cases the occupants were expressing anxieties. This explains why the term *spiritual midden* seemed an apt description, to distinguish these sites from the one-off secretions, which could be placed there during construction or renovation by the owners or builders or both, and which therefore have a limited number of contents. Because the objects most commonly found in great numbers are discarded shoes, usually singles rather than pairs, it is not a rubbish pit in the normal sense, where one would always expect that pairs of shoes would predominate.

In this country nearly all these deposits, whether the one-off kind or those continually added to, have been found by accident during building work. For this reason it is uncertain if the sites are described correctly, or if collections reported or given to museums are complete: there must always be a temptation by builders limited by time, or the owners working on site, to cherry-pick the obviously recognisable items. When two *spiritual middens* were discovered in 2010 at Hestley Hall, Thorndon, large numbers of fragmentary pieces of cloth and paper were sifted from the accumulations of dust that had built up within each void. When the ancillary materials located within the various shafts are described later on, it may become clearer why uncertainty exists about the completeness of some collections presented to, and by, museums. It is hoped that, following publication of several articles about these *spiritual midden* sites explaining the exact locations, the dates and range of objects from top to bottom, informed house restorers might in the future have sufficient curiosity to approach the possible locations and make a small hole at the base of the most likely deposition spots first to ascertain if there are objects hidden within, before tearing the wall down. Checking for any historic paint surfaces first is essential.

### **Locations for deposition**

In the relatively prosperous farming area of East Anglia it was not uncommon for chimneys to be rebuilt or upgraded, together with their hearths, three or four times between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From the

seventeenth century onwards, unless a stack was provided only with lower hearths for the ground floor rooms, most of these larger farm- and town-houses would have two chimneys, with between one and six hearths on the upper two floors, two to four serving the upper chambers, and in some cases two more in the attic rooms.

Part of the usual finishing process from about 1600 onwards, assuming there were no hearths at first-floor level, was the construction of vertical framed walls to enclose the brickwork in the upper chambers that was not intended to be visible, then lathing and plastering to give a finish to each room that matched the other walls and connected with the plastered ceiling. It is behind these walls that spaces around the chimney were available for discarding personal items: in the wedge-shaped gap between the vertical walls and the sloping brickwork as it narrows to meet at the ridge to form the external stack (Figure 9.1). Because the walls usually finished just above the ceiling level and the tops were left unsealed, once the depositor was above these junctions in the attic or roof void, he or she could drop objects into the dark cavities behind the walls.

For rooms that were provided with first-floor hearths, there are often two voids readily available at the corner angles along one side of the chimney. At Cutchey's Farm are two such examples incorporated into the side wall (Figures 9.2a, A&B). Whereas each of the corners just described has a single shaft, in other houses where there is no upper hearth the front facing wall may have two or three spaces behind it, depending on the position of the hidden studwork. Such was the case at Barley House Farm, Winston (Figure 9.1). With both types there may be a gap about one to two feet wide between lath-and-plaster and the sloping brickwork at the top. The gap left at the first-floor junction will taper to perhaps half an inch. For this reason an initial exploratory hole should be made about nine to eighteen inches up from the floor, where there should be a gap behind of a few inches, enough to trap the lowest of the larger objects dropped down, like shoes. With the front-facing wall, two or three holes may be required, after it has been established that there is no early decoration present. Once any objects have been located this is the time to pause and request the guidance of an experienced helper. What is required is an orderly removal of each item from the base, after which each one is labelled and photographed and placed in a clear, numbered bag. This gives the possibility later for a comprehensive analysis, and perhaps a more complete picture of possible motives. When given the rare chance to record such a find properly, which may well include several hundred items, great care should be taken to save everything in the right order. It will be nearly impossible to remember when the objects are analysed, perhaps several months later. Particular care should be taken to resist the temptation to clean anything, as items like shoes will have farm-yard mud caked on them, and objects may have been deliberately put inside. These can easily fall out, so each should be placed in a labelled clear bag.

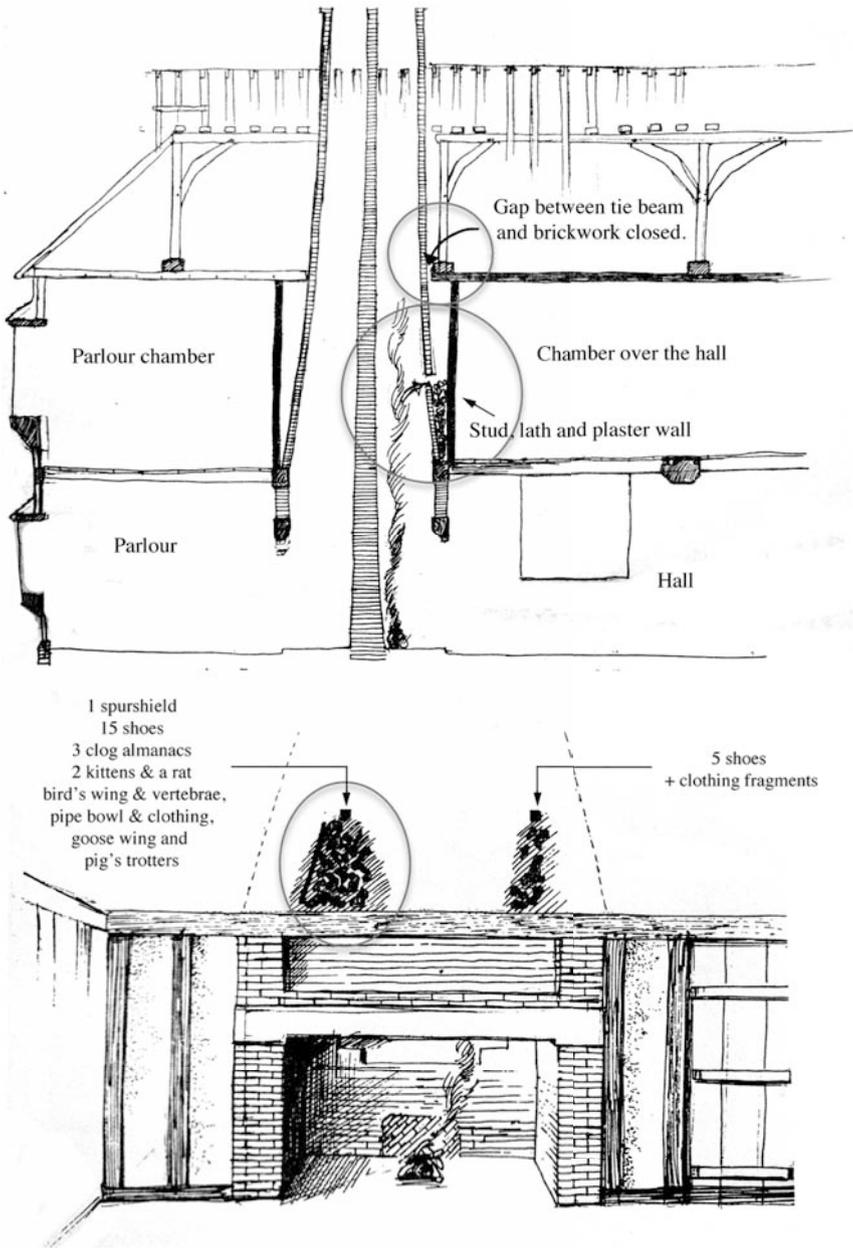
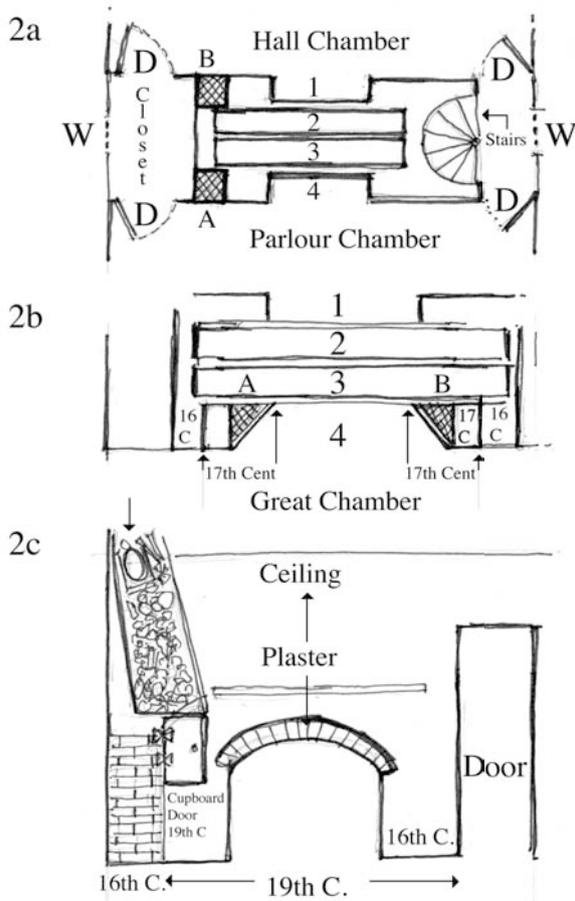


Figure 9.1 Barley House Farm, Winston. The access areas, from inside the hearth on the ground floor, are shown for the two spiritual midden chambers

Source: Easton, 'Four Spiritual Middens'.



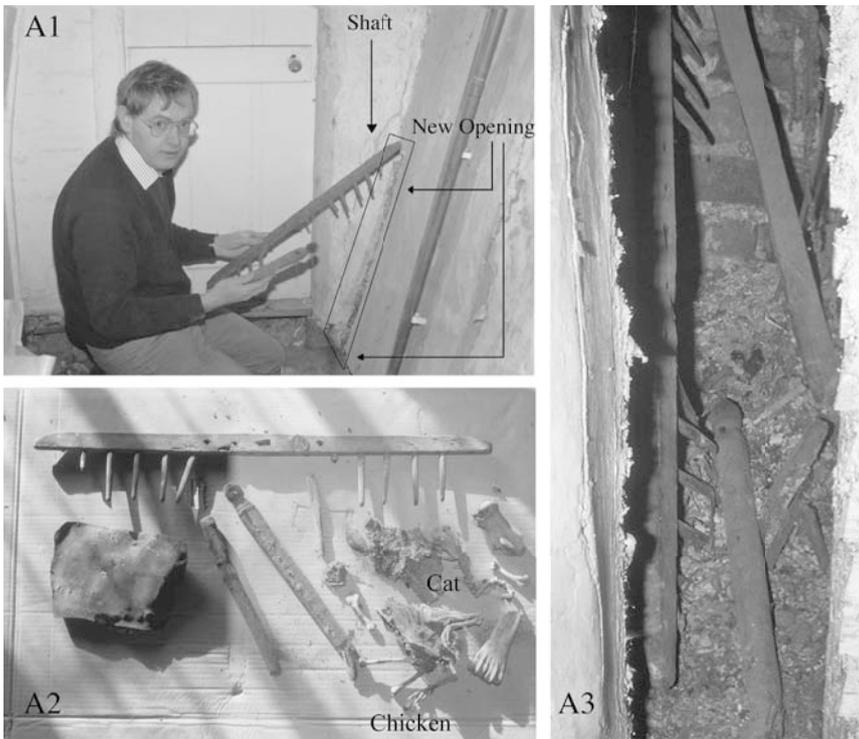
*Figure 9.2* (a) A&B Cutchey's Farm, Badwell Ash. Plan of the upper hearths with the position of the two shafts and resting place for the discarded objects, marked A and B. (b) A&B Hestley Hall, Thorndon. The two wedge-shaped cavities on the inner side of the recreated seventeenth-century upper hearth are marked A and B. (c) The Malthouse, Earl Soham. The shaft containing the spiritual midden is formed above the top of the nineteenth-century cupboard, itself built into the sixteenth-century hearth

*Source:* Easton, 'Four Spiritual Middens'.

One of the houses noted here, Cutchey's Farm, Badwell Ash, had two adjacent shafts behind a common side wall beside two upper hearths. This side wall was in a connecting closet between the parlour chamber and hall chamber, while the opposite side of the stack has a staircase and a landing built in (Figures 9.2a, A&B). The first shaft was discovered accidentally,

whilst the second was carefully excavated by a county archaeologist, Edward Martin, both in 1989 (Figure 9.2a, B, Photograph 9.A1). In this latter case, once it had been established that there were objects at the base of shaft B the hole was enlarged sufficiently to photograph, extract and record each item in an order that related to the original deposition. Unlike the first midden (A), which contained a larger quantity of objects, the controlled examination of the second shaft (B) did not yield any datable items, but it was important as it indicated that this shaft was less easily accessible from the boarded attic because there was no floor to stand on over the adjoining closet. This second shaft contained faunal material, which was absent from the first. Some items found in the first shaft such as shoes and clay pipes were approximately dated, and an examination of the layers from top to bottom gave an idea of the time-span taken to make the fill.<sup>3</sup>

Hestley Hall, Thorndon, also had two separate shafts. These were examined in 2010 and the summary results are given later (Figure 9.2b). Here,



Photograph 9.A1, 9.A2 and 9.A3 Cutchey's Farm. A1. The archaeological excavation carried out in 1989 into shaft 2a B and photo 9.A1 (outlined) and 9.A3 (exposed), showing wooden objects and faunal material, 9.A2

the early sixteenth-century fireplace is in a comparatively grand room on the upper floor of a gentry house.<sup>4</sup> The locations of the finds here are at variance with those of many other spiritual middens. The seventeenth-century internal enclosing walls of a smaller hearth, built inside the earlier one, were set at angles and connected to the sixteenth-century back wall (Figures 9.2b, A&B). The top sections on both side walls, normally raked back and plastered over to seal them, had been deliberately broken away so that the many objects could be put into both sides from inside the hearth. At Bedfield Hall, the internal side wall of the 1620 kitchen hearth had been breached in a similar manner at the level of the lintel. When the contents were recorded in 1985, the three-foot-wide shaft behind was sealed at first-floor level and so the items within, which dated from 1700 to 1850, must have been inserted from inside the hearth.

At Hestley Hall, the first midden was discovered by accident and, because the finders stopped work so that the author could be contacted, a brick was subsequently removed from the base of the second possible site to establish that this too contained objects, which were then carefully excavated and fully recorded in order. These last three houses gave rare opportunities: during a thirty-two-year period there has been only one other find of a similar date that was fully recorded during excavation in 1983, at Barley House Farm, Winston. (Figure 9.1). This example is typical in that the entrance to the voids is at attic level, but there is one distinct difference. The normal gap for deposition from the attic was blocked because the top of the wall at ceiling level and the earlier tie-beam to which it abutted were too close to the sloping brickwork. The access had to be made about nine feet up from inside the chimney, and by making two separate holes in the brickwork. The deposits in all three houses include large quantities of artefacts from the last quarter of the seventeenth century, up to the 1760s.

At Hill Farm, Spexhall, an attempt had also been made to gain access to the gap behind the upper wall from inside the lower hearth. This visit, in 1988, was arranged by Ralph Merrifield, and although we arrived there at the owner's request, he could produce only four items, although he had mentioned much greater numbers of objects (including six cats) in his letter to Merrifield. We could not verify this, but to add credibility to his claims he did inform Merrifield that he had worked for a time in London as an archaeologist!

At Spexhall a brick had been removed about nine feet up on the inner wall above the hall lintel in an attempt to gain access to the space behind. This was exactly the same method as that employed at Barley House Farm, Winston (Figure 9.1). Whereas there was a logical explanation for this unusual access at Winston, at Spexhall there must have been a much easier route down, from behind the upper wall in the attic. This attempt to gain entry from inside the chimney failed because the brick that was removed was hard up against a timber post supporting the bedroom wall above. If

one of the bricks on either side had been removed, the depositions would have gained access to one or more of the voids.

Merrifield and I visited the attic, and after removing a nineteenth-century skirting board at the base of the partition wall against the chimney, we could see the top opening where it seemed the objects had been inserted. Looking down the shaft I could see an animal bone lodged on a piece of lathing that had broken away from the internal wall about four feet down. This was the confirmation needed to prove the usual route for most objects entering these spiritual middens. No doubt the bone is still in place, perhaps to be rediscovered in another two hundred years. Whether the six cats or other items ever turned up is unknown.

A fifth complete example was found at the Malthouse, Earl Soham, in 1985, but this dates from the mid-nineteenth century (Figure 9.2c). Although it shares some characteristics with the eighteenth-century examples, it has some notable differences, which are found also in other spiritual middens of a similar late date. These will be discussed later. Four of these case studies were examined in some detail during 2014 and the comparisons and differences between the earlier examples and the nineteenth-century spiritual middens are the subject of a forthcoming article.<sup>5</sup>

## What objects might be expected

### Human apparel

In many collections clothing, in the widest sense, predominates. Perhaps this is because these items are the most recognisable and the easiest to



*Photograph 9.B1 and 9.B2* The Malthouse. The 31 shoes being examined by June Swann (facing in 9.B1) and the mirror without its reflective glass and two bottles discussed in text (9.B2)

identify, and can indicate the sex, social standing and age of the wearer as well as the period they lived in. The fabrics and other materials of the clothes and accessories can do the same, but climatic conditions and the depredations of rodents and insects can make them less easy to understand, and less interesting to the untutored eye. At Hestley Hall, the owner was asked to collect and store all the dust amongst the objects from the second, controlled excavation site. When eventually this dust was sifted through, after the main objects had been catalogued, it was found to contain countless quantities of textile and paper fragments, many unrelated to the larger garment sections. Undoubtedly some had disintegrated as a result of rodent and insect activity, but our impression was that a considerable proportion had been saved and deposited as fragments. Leather dress accessories in other locations, such as belts and a section of leather jerkin, were less vulnerable to degradation.

### **Animal apparel and farm equipment**

Among the materials those associated with horses, such as leather bridles and traces, and in one case a horseshoe, stand out as particularly distinctive. In rural houses, other equipment associated with farming and the family's way of life is represented. Hay and grass rake heads are numerous, sometimes near-complete despite woodworm attack, and sometimes only in sections. With these are metal tools such as sickles, hammer heads, chisels, nails and chains. At first-floor level, in relatively dry conditions, these are well enough preserved as to be identifiable. So it is for other metalwork, such as parts of cooking vessels, padlocks, keys and patten irons worn under eighteenth-century shoes in muddy conditions.

### **Timber objects, timber offcuts and wood**

Other material includes the residue from the production of small items of turned furniture, which may have been made by the occupants when conditions were not suitable for practical work on the farm. Other occupational cast-offs can be found, such as lace bobbins within secretions around Eye, which had a reputation for the high quality of its lace in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> It was common practice for farmers to have other jobs in lean times. Apart from purpose-made sections of furnishings and tools, one of the surprising facts to emerge from comparative examinations of spiritual middens was the amount of timber and wood, in many shapes and sizes, which was deliberately deposited. These pieces could easily have been used on the fires, instead of wasting them in a liminal space, but there was a deliberate purpose to 'sacrificing' them to another cause. This will be explained further on. The wood can range from medium-size logs, to thin sticks, usually

suitable for kindling. The timber can be heavy pieces of oak sections to offcuts. Apart from these there can often be lengths of mouldings from panelling and picture frames, shelf brackets, small pieces of carvings, and the side sections of firkins including the head pieces, and other wooden vessels<sup>7</sup> (Figure 9.2).

### Broken vessels

Some of the last few items in the wooden category were from broken vessels. There are also broken pottery containers. Although it is mostly sections of pots and bowls that are included, several of the vessels found behind the enclosing walls at Hestley Hall are nearly complete chamber pots. It is not clear, because analysis has not been done, what the residues inside one, in particular, are composed of. Were these chamber pots reused for another purpose? Also found here were smaller bowls with residues inside, and two sections of glass that was clearly part of an apothecary's vessel. A small white tin-glazed pot could also have been used in the same business. The records for the family living here at the time of these deposits do not suggest that they were in that trade. Were these and the former chamber pots being used for some form of alchemical experiments?

Fragments of glass, like the sections of pottery vessels, are much more commonly found in these secretions than whole vessels. When considering why the inhabitants would bother to save relatively small pieces of glass for inclusion, one could speculate that it could be related to the superstition that breaking glass could bring bad luck. However, this superstition is usually connected to broken looking-glass mirrors. In the Malthouse at Earl Soham a whole dressing-table mirror, minus its reflective glass, had been pushed into the shaft but no fragments of mirror glass were found (Figure 9.2c). This would seem to be an extravagant waste of a good piece of furniture that could easily have been repaired, but when this deposit was analysed it seemed likely the glass had been broken when the new occupiers of the house, the Rice family, had moved their possessions from their old home and business in Thorndon to their new home and brewery in Earl Soham during August 1850.<sup>8</sup>

In many cultures small pieces of glass can be worn or buried to act as a lure or to repel *maleficium* (evil). One word used to describe these is 'flash', which captures the essence of the shiny surfaces. In Britain, pieces of glass bottles or shiny knapped flint were used on the walls of buildings, perhaps with a similar intention. Above the windows and behind the plaster of an early twentieth-century kitchen at Ulveston Hall, near Debenham, was a large quantity of whole and broken glass lemonade bottles. Local tradition said these were to deter rats.

## Faunal material

Desiccated cats, perhaps the best known of the animals that were hidden in buildings, are not often represented in spiritual middens; but Barley House Farm had two kittens and a small rat together amongst the collection of secreted objects (Figure 9.1). As mentioned earlier, Spexhall's midden had apparently included six cats. At Bedfield Hall, behind the internal side wall of the kitchen hearth, were skeletal remains along with examples of all the familiar objects encountered in other spiritual middens. Because these had dropped to the earthen floor, their condition was not as good as that of objects found higher up in other houses. The additional range of various small mammals and birds might be expected as the accidental fill of an open topped spiritual midden, but as this one was sealed from the floor above and also contained the complete skeleton of a small cat and bones of ox, sheep and chicken, all these bones must have been deliberately inserted through the side wall.

Apart from animal bones, which often show signs of butchery, chickens crop up in a number of collections. At Cutchey's Farm there was a complete desiccated chicken in the excavated second shaft (Figure 9.2a, B). Two floors below, next to the ground-floor fireplace, there was a rare survival, a built-in, two-tiered chicken cage. This could have housed chickens sitting on eggs, or perhaps a sick bird which died and was eventually consigned to the midden to avert any bad magic which might have been carried out on it. Eggs were also present in the Hestley Hall middens, but there was also a most unusual arrangement with another chicken in a different, triangular, section. This latter bird was particularly noteworthy, for it was mounted on a medium-sized log that had been burnt and extinguished at one end (Photograph 9.C or Figure 9.3). A wedge of dung held the bird on the log, and this assembly was lowered to the bottom of the right-hand shaft and was still attached when found; the earliest dated shoe here was above this level and was early eighteenth century. Because the feet of the chicken are missing it is not possible to say if it was a cock or hen. If it was the former, it could be surmised that its potential to crow when alerted by danger like fire or a stranger, may have been the reason for such an unusual arrangement.

It has long been known that geese are useful for sounding the alarm when they detect strangers or danger – some burglars still fear these birds almost more than they do dogs. This might explain the presence of goose remains and equipment in all three of the eighteenth-century spiritual middens described in 2014, as well as further goose remnants that have been recovered from other houses, most notably Hestley Hall, where there were sixteen goose wings from at least eight birds, with a goose *furcula* (wishbone). At Cutchey's Farmhouse there were three long thin sticks as used for driving geese, and at Barley House Farm another goose wing.



*Photograph 9.C* Hestley Hall. A chicken purposefully mounted on a burnt log and secured in place with a wedge of dung. This very unusual arrangement was found at the base of one of the spiritual middens (9.2b B) in Hestley Hall, Suffolk.

### **Nineteenth-century spiritual middens**

Several chimney middens from this date are composed of materials similar to those of the previous century, though there is less faunal evidence. Because nineteenth-century people were generally more literate there are often hand-written notes and letters, printed texts and receipts of trade in many of them. The material found at the Malthouse, Earl Soham, in 1985 includes letters, receipts on spikes and account books, as well as religious and reforming books (Figure 9.2c).

A notable feature of some later middens is that they may contain a significant quantity of shoes. From the eighteenth-century spiritual middens one may expect anything up to twenty shoes. The Malthouse had thirty-one shoes. Another nineteenth-century one, at The Barracks, Nutley, Surrey, had upward of sixty-six shoes, some of which had already been given away when the deposit was inspected in 2002. The shoes dated from between 1880 and 1900.<sup>9</sup> One other large nineteenth-century group discovered in Wales apparently had a hundred shoes. These were excavated, having been

found below a hearth in a ruined cottage called Gelli Iago, in Nant Gwnant, Snowdonia, belonging to the National Trust. The press reports of this find raised the possibility that the cottage may have been occupied by a cobbler but, the fact that they were all single shoes made this seem less likely.

The shoes found at Nutley had relatively few other items with them. Research has not been done to see if the house was ever occupied by someone in the shoe-repairing trade. Some other nineteenth-century middens, however, contain fewer shoes. Another find, partly recovered from 28A Abbeygate Street, Bury St Edmunds, of large quantities of leather behind a lath and plaster wall on the first floor, poses a similar question about the possible occupation of the consigner. However, there were other familiar materials such as shoes, an early nineteenth-century receipt, coin, cloth and broken glass amongst the leather offcuts.

### **Differences and similarities between spiritual middens and ritual concealments in the nineteenth century**

A common feature of nineteenth-century chimney finds is that the discarded objects had been dropped down onto the roof of a stout wooden box forming a cupboard built into an earlier fireplace. This was the case at the Malthouse, Earl Soham (Figure 9.2c). Hearth sizes were reduced considerably with the introduction of coal grates, and so the space that was no longer required within the larger hearths allowed for these cupboards to be built to one side. Those ritual middens where objects were discarded into a shaft from the attic, down onto the cupboard inside a first-floor hearth, qualify as spiritual middens if the hole at the top remained open so that further objects could be added over time (Figure 9.2c). When the box was built into the downstairs hearth, the objects lying on the roof of the cupboard were sealed in above, usually with floorboards. Unless there is a breach in the side wall, these then are ritual concealments. In the latter case the implication is that the items had been deposited by the occupants, perhaps with the builders' assistance, while the cupboard was being built. So despite their similarities, these do not conform to my definition of a spiritual midden, though the secreted objects were not dissimilar. The terms used here are of course modern, and there is no way of knowing how these ritual deposits were described in the past. The distinction between the two types of midden can be borderline and may in some instances not have had any influence on the actions undertaken. The date-range of the objects in the nineteenth-century middens can be much narrower than is found in eighteenth-century middens, and could indicate that each one was assembled with its selected objects within a year. It is hard to believe that the large amount of material gathered for the Malthouse spiritual midden could have gone into the shaft at just one time. Most such groups, gathered as a one-off assemblage, have relatively few items.

The very nature of the written material found in many nineteenth-century ritual middens could indicate that there is another motive, not present in the eighteenth-century examples. This could be to mark a significant time in the life of the occupants. Analysis of the large amount of material at the Malthouse, datable to around 1850, and particularly the printed and written bills, account books and family members' names, suggests an approximate date and may indicate when this family moved from their house and brewing business in Thorndon to their new business premises and house in Earl Soham.

Louisa Rice was sixteen when she wrote her name twice on the last page of one of the five completed Thorndon account books, followed by the names of her parents, Robert and Susanna Rice, then those of her younger siblings James and Susannah. There was one further child who is not listed in this book, presumably because he had not yet been born. Walter was born in Thorndon in June 1850 and is listed with the rest of the family at Earl Soham in the census taken on 31 March 1851. It looks as if the midden represented the closing of the family's way of life in Thorndon as they made a fresh start. A copy of the *News of the World* for 18 August 1850 included in the midden may indicate when this family moved their house and brewing business from one village to another. However, it is possible that further objects were added in subsequent years.

## **The written and printed material**

Although it is true that personal or printed material is most likely to be found in the middens formed during the nineteenth century, there are examples from earlier times. Many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pieces of paper, either hand-written or without writing on them, were concealed in walls, faults in beams and behind hearths, together with other objects. In an upper gentry house, Nowton Hall, a ritual concealment was discovered in a shaft beside the hall hearth of 1592. A small group of objects included a carefully made small Y-shaped stick, perhaps referencing the number three. With it were some pages of a letter of 1610 from John Southwell of Barham to his son-in-law Thomas Poley, who moved into the house around 1610, advising on an annuity and property in Canterbury, together with a bailiff's account dated midsummer 1606 listing sheep flocks. These objects were in a shaft where they would have been irretrievable, perhaps placed there by Thomas after his father died in 1612. This personal document was apparently not intended to be recovered, but discoveries of other earlier hand-written manuscripts, some possibly retrievable, do raise the question of why they were deposited. At Read Hall, Mickfield, an early seventeenth-century rental for properties in nearby Debenham was found in the roof void next to the chimney. It is difficult to decide whether this was stored because of the dry condition next to a stack, or whether, like the Nowton document, there

may have been some apotropaic belief in associating the family names with objects in liminal spaces.

Another early nineteenth-century spiritual midden with documents, at Hall Farmhouse, Ketteringham, Norfolk, contained a combination of household objects and furnishings, and clearly represented something of the taste of this gentleman's house. As with several other spiritual middens there were sections of wallpaper and trimmings included, the colours as fresh as when they were made in the 1820s. Amongst the cross section of materials, which included shoes, was the draft of an indignant letter by the owner to a correspondent who was clearly demanding that a debt be settled. It seems highly probable that the writer was responsible for depositing most or all these items in the midden as it seems unlikely he would entrust a rather embarrassing document to another person. There were some other extraneous items that will be dealt with in the following section.

### **Additional materials within the fill of some spiritual middens**

The present owner of the house at Ketteringham reported that the former owner had discarded several blood-stained rags. With them was a surprising item: the skeleton of an infant. It seems likely that the bloodstained cloths and the infant are related to one incident: the concealment of the body of a new-born child. A maid sleeping in the attic in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century would seem to be the most likely culprit. An open shaft would have been a convenient place to hide a baby's body. The risks of being found out were great, but may have outweighed the consequences of giving birth to a bastard child. A find of this kind is not unique: a child's skeleton was discovered in a spiritual midden at a cottage near Stowmarket in the 1990s; and two skeletons were found hidden in a Northamptonshire cottage wall in 2010. The latter were both babies about forty weeks old, one from the 1920s and the other from the 1930s. With finds of this kind an autopsy is usually held to establish that the remains are not modern. Such finds are a poignant reminder of the desperate measures employed to stave off a fate like the workhouse. Infanticide was a capital offence, so the consequences could be much worse. These are rather dramatic discoveries that can make the finders feel differently about the concealed objects, although the original spiritual midden deposits were made for entirely different reasons.

Most of the extraneous material found in spiritual middens consists of debris from building work, much of it from the roof. With an experienced eye it should be possible to separate these remnants, like brick, tile, wall-laths, plaster and thatch, from the deliberately concealed items. Sometimes, however, offcuts of timber and pieces of wood were deposited deliberately (as described above). These can be confused with building refuse, so it is wise to keep all the less obvious material in a bag or box for a second opinion. If

the excavation has been carried out in a systematic way, most of the detritus from building renovations will be towards the top layer.

## **Conclusion**

What can be learned from analysing these larger collections in spiritual middens? Perhaps a comparison is appropriate to the way that scribed and painted symbols and the placement of burn marks can all have protective connotations, but may also have different meanings depending on their shapes, location, and the intensity of their application. So too the objects selected to be deposited in a midden beside the chimney may all have been intended to help towards the general protection of the building, household, family members and the trade being conducted, but might separately have targeted specific fears. Perhaps the memory of these collections as a whole, or the knowledge that there was a possibility of continued additions, meant that they were regarded both as a lure for unwanted spirits into a liminal trap and a reassurance of the family members' presence in the building. By the end of the nineteenth century there seems to be a continuation of the apotropaic practice of concealments in spiritual middens, but other clues hint at a more conscious attempt to record something of the owners' lives, commemorated by personal documents and books indicating their faith.

The presence of the faunal material, in particular the cats, chickens/cock-reels and remnants of geese, may be related to an attempt to harness these creature's abilities to entrap unwanted visitors or warn of impending disasters like fire.

Most striking has been the large amount of timber, wood and sticks, and the evidence that deliberately burnt material had been consigned to these voids. These point to the ever-present fear of accidental fire and the devastating consequences to most families' livelihoods. Accidents from fire were a principal cause of death in the home, second only to the obvious risks connected with childbirth, and it is unlikely that with such worries, families would take the risk of putting a recently doused brand into a hidden wooden shaft. They must have been saved these for a day or so, or soaked them in water first.

So far the majority of spiritual middens have been found in Suffolk, but this may simply indicate that they are better known in this county. The odd examples from Norfolk and Wales and the filled shaft of shoes and objects in Surrey suggests that there may be more such middens to be discovered in other areas.

## **Notes**

My thanks to all the owners of the spiritual midden sites and the other objects listed and in particular to June Swann, MBE, for all her help since the early 1980s with the

careful examination, dating and reports of the discovered shoes. To Dr. Joanna and Edward Martin, Philip Aitkens, Alan Massey, John McCann, Chris Mycock, Antony Wells-Cole and many others who have advised on locations or specific finds.

1. Timothy Easton, contributor to Vernacular Architecture Group and Regional Furniture Society joint winter conference, London, 1989. Conference written up in the following newsletter, 1990.
2. M. Chris Manning, 'The Material Culture of Ritual Concealments in the United States', *Historical Archaeology*, 48(3) (2014), 52–83. Her first page gives a good summary of the various terms used by scholars to describe concealed finds and suggests *ritual concealments* as the most appropriate.
3. Timothy Easton, 'Four Spiritual Middens in Mid Suffolk, England, ca. 1650 to 1850', *Historical Archaeology*, 48(3) (2014), 10–34. For date range of objects at Cutcheys farm, see 14–21.
4. Easton, 'Four Spiritual Middens', 14, 16, figure 3.
5. Easton, 'Four Spiritual Middens', 10–34; Timothy Easton, 'Characteristics of 19th-Century Spiritual Middens in East Anglia', *Post-Medieval Archaeology* (forthcoming).
6. Nicky Howener-Townsend, *Suffolk Lace and the Lacemakers of Eye* (Kessingland, Suffolk, 2009).
7. Easton, 'Four Spiritual Middens', 21, fig 7, 22, fig 8, 28–29.
8. Easton, 'Four Spiritual Middens', 22–24.
9. They are now in the collection of the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum, Singleton Sussex.

# 10

## Textual Evidence for the Material History of Amulets in Seventeenth-Century England

*Alexander Cummins*

Defining an amulet, at least in exclusive terms distinguishing it from other magical objects, is not a straightforward task.<sup>1</sup> It has been remarked ‘Greek and Latin alone offer more than forty expressions for designating talismans’.<sup>2</sup> One distinction holds that amulets are natural items with useful effects, making talismans ‘the same class of objects decorated with artificial marks’.<sup>3</sup> One of the earliest usages of the Latin word *amuletum* (from *amoliri*, to drive away, to protect), by Varro in the first century BCE, referred to an object ‘attributed with a preventative virtue against illnesses, afflictions, accidents and evil spells’.<sup>4</sup> Historically, a number of features were used to identify an amulet: a protective function; being marked in some way; as well as being attached, placed or hidden on a person or at a particular site. Elsewhere, lines were simply drawn between licit and illicit objects.<sup>5</sup>

In this study, ‘amulet’ covers ‘sigils’, ‘seals’, ‘pentacles’, ‘lamens’, and, to an extent, ‘ymages’. Given how theoretically and technologically interrelated such items of occult significance frequently were, an inclusive approach seems more fruitful in this survey of their material history.<sup>6</sup> Magical practitioners like Elias Ashmole (1617–1692) distinguished various ‘Sigills, Lamels, Talesmes’, yet also noted that ‘all depend upon one Radix ... the Secret power of Figures’.<sup>7</sup>

Study of seventeenth-century English amulets provides a very rare example of a class of magical objects in Christian Britain for which there is abundant textual evidence. Such a study may draw upon the scholarship of early modern natural philosophy, economics and society.<sup>8</sup> Social and print histories of religion and science (especially those covering astrology) further contextualise amulets,<sup>9</sup> while editions of the journals and diaries of seventeenth-century English astrologers illuminate their place in early modern social, political and economic life, as well as offering glimpses of the technical minutiae of constructing magical objects.<sup>10</sup> Other contemporary magical practitioners’ manuscript ‘working books’ also provide valuable

material.<sup>11</sup> Such emphasis on the textual history of magic has also yielded a number of transcriptions of manuscript grimoires, evidencing a variety of pentacles, lamens, seals, and other amuletic items found in contemporary ritual magic.<sup>12</sup> Case studies of folklore have traced wider connections between early modern English charms, rituals, and amulets.<sup>13</sup> Emphasis on 'folk' magic customs and beliefs has also provided a wealth of evidence of the quotidian experience of magical objects.<sup>14</sup> Finally, amulets, and accompanying rituals of prescription and regimen, have been shown to occupy a central role in early modern intersections of English medicine and magic.<sup>15</sup>

## Contexts

In order to give a more detailed study of the bodies of relevant work, let us examine the various seventeenth-century contexts for texts concerning amulets.

The theological context of seventeenth-century English amulets centres, as was noted earlier, upon the fallout of the Anglican church's rejection of their old ecclesiastical counter-magic – 'holy water, the sign of the cross, and all the paraphernalia of the Roman Catholic exorcists' – while continuing to espouse the reality and severity of malefic witchcraft.<sup>16</sup> Practising magicians delivered protection, healing and 'unbewitching' in the form of charms and amulets, and while such practices were 'condemned by the church as magic...most of them were based ultimately on religious beliefs and practices, and to many villagers they seemed consistent with popular piety'.<sup>17</sup> This consistency also had 'an intellectual legacy'<sup>18</sup> of theoretical backing. Marsilio Ficino is credited with combining astrological medicine and Neoplatonic philosophy to defend and explore how 'stones and metals with stellar characteristics could be positioned on one's body', specifically in order to show how 'magic was not a perversion of religion but a perfection of it'.<sup>19</sup> Ficino's influence was especially felt in England from Thomas Elyot's popular translation of his *Courtier* in 1531, to his impact upon the Cambridge Platonists, the Royal Society, and Isaac Newton in debates over science, reason, and religion.<sup>20</sup>

Amulets, unsurprisingly then, feature prominently in early modern medical discourses, enjoying both 'vogue and respectability', and the seventeenth century saw increasing debate about their best function and application.<sup>21</sup> Their medical context should be understood as bridging established Galenic and newer Paracelsian modes. It has been emphasised that Galenic approaches tended to work via allopathic 'cure-by-contrary', in which good health was achieved by rebalancing the patient's constitution, with counteracting medical treatments re-adjusting this pathological *dyscrasia*.<sup>22</sup> Paracelsian approaches relied more upon doctrines of signatures and 'cures-by-governance', whereby materials possessing characteristics, properties or effects like the afflicted body or malady were compounded as medicaments.<sup>23</sup>

Either way, metals were cast, stones engraved, and ‘appropriate herbs were bundled and worn about the neck to effect the cure’.<sup>24</sup> Both methodologies had use of medical amulets in ‘harnessing astral or sympathetic powers...to enhance health or counter disease’.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, they seem especially prevalent in discussion and treatment of plague. The *zenexton* – a paste sealed in a stamped metal case worn as a medallion against the plague – also seems to have proved especially popular, being developed throughout the seventeenth century by various European physicians.<sup>26</sup>

In general, ‘the wearing of an amulet as a cure’ was ‘for the seventeenth-century wearer...based on contemporary scientific assumptions’.<sup>27</sup> These assumptions had at least two bases: new mechanic theories of matter, and – to a lesser extent – old magical principles concerning occult virtue. The former found expression in various mechanical explanations of effluvia or invisible particles naturally emanating from materials. Scientific reformer Robert Boyle expounded such ideas about the material corpuscular efficacy of amulets, while criticising occult notions of the agency of spiritual beings or sympathetic-action-at-a-distance.<sup>28</sup>

Operational and organisational principles of a magical cosmos – such as reflection or exposure, and the ontological categories of the elements and planets which formed occult taxonomies of matter and forces, respectively – drew upon Renaissance traditions of natural magic (exemplified by Ficino, Cornelius Agrippa, Giordano Bruno, and Giambatista della Porta) as well as earlier doctrines of astrological image and sigil magic.<sup>29</sup> Thus the signatures of natural materials used to make amulets – impressions and marks that can be interpreted, and more broadly, their morphology and properties – ‘are the Characters and Figures of those Starrs, by whom they are principally governed, and with these particular Stamps, have also peculiar and different vertues bestowed upon them’.<sup>30</sup> This defence of amulets was rooted in natural philosophical contemplation of occult ‘virtue’.

Explanations featuring mechanic effluvia and occult sympathy were even combined:

So very often there is a more occult virtue in those Amulets that are hung about persons, which growing hot by touching the body, send forth atoms, and *little particles and effluvioms*, when we perceive them not, and infuse into us efficacious Antidotes, which we receive in at the mouth and thro the skin. Learned Physicians made use of these formerly out of choice, when the Distemper was proof against alteratives and purgatives, for there is a congenite *propriety of fellowship and discord between some things*, by which they alter themselves without any apparent touch, as Amber attracts Straws, the Magnet Iron.<sup>31</sup>

Contemporary debates, especially medical discourses, attest ‘widespread acceptance of amulet therapy’, yet also disclose ‘sharp disagreements

concerning when and why amulets were effective in preventing disease and in curing existing diseases'.<sup>32</sup> Both medical and philosophical amulet debates had a strong component of various tensions in epistemological emphasis on either experimental experience (also attested to in their professional magical contexts) and, as we shall now examine, appeals to scholastic authority.

This historiographical context included frequent appeals to ancient precedent. Ashmole opined: 'the framing of Sigills, Lamels, Talesmes... is a piece of Learning as... Ancient as the Babilonian and Caldean Magi, (who first found out the Secret power of Figures)'; amulets were 'a chiefe part of their Magick', with their craft even 'practiced by the greatest Philosophers of the Eastern World; where remain to this day... very many and ancient Talesmes'.<sup>33</sup>

Such precedential appeals were themselves predicated on notions of *prisca theologia*: that the Almighty had transmitted a single stream of true religion long ago that had hence become muddled and fragmented. Disparate historical sources were thus considered as refractions of a single divinely inspired 'Ancient Wisdom'. This notion of powerful lore only partially recovered from a tenebrous past – particularly of 'certain unknowable letters and writings... which *the Ancients* called Hyeroglyphicall, or sacred letters'<sup>34</sup> – is also instrumental in understanding so-called 'barbarous words' and other magical formulae that graced certain sigils amulets.

Baldwin argues use of such words of power, along with Scriptural verses and names of spirits, actually declined in popularity over the seventeenth century, being decried as 'magical, superstitious, demonic or ineffective', and replaced by the reformist mechanical effluvia explanations.<sup>35</sup> Such is part of the context for the work of Buckinghamshire clergyman and astrologer-physician Richard Napier (1559–1634), who collected scriptural evidence from the Ancient *Christian* Fathers to demonstrate 'the antiquity and original of images'; concluding 'it is not lawful to make an idolatrical image, yet it is lawful to make others, images not idolatrical'.<sup>36</sup> Again, the appeal is to the age and secret wisdom of such amulet craft, yet Napier goes a step further than Ashmole's citation of Eastern philosophers, employing an example of one of the most famous magician-heroes of Christendom: 'Solomon sent for Hiram to work all manner of work of brass who was a man full of wisdom and knowledge to work, and he is not condemned for it'.<sup>37</sup>

Amulet users cited natural histories of Pliny<sup>38</sup> and Dioscorides<sup>39</sup> as well as making scholastic appeals to traditional medical textbooks attributed to Galen and Hippocrates.<sup>40</sup> Contemporary magicians also made use of the Jewish grimoire known as *Sepher Raziël* or *Liber Salomonis*,<sup>41</sup> and the *Heptameron* and various texts attributed to Albertus Magnus, which had been in print since the sixteenth century. Magical practitioners would also find discussion and utilities of amulets in more recent treatises on occult philosophy, natural magic, and demonology,<sup>42</sup> as well as grimoiric spirit lists.<sup>43</sup>

There is a particular professional context to seventeenth-century English magical objects. Not only were various astrologer-physicians, alchemists, conjurers, cunning-folk, and clergymen making, using and prescribing amulets to their patients and clients; they were talking to each other about it. Correspondence between practitioners evidences interactions of patronage, rivalry and collegiality. The Arabic manual of astrological magic, *Picatrix*, was copied, studied and shared by these occultists.<sup>44</sup> In 1611, Lambeth-based magician and astrologer-physician Simon Forman (1552–1611) actually sent Napier brass moulds for casting astrological sigils, appending instructions and further notes for their utility.<sup>45</sup>

Textual sources tracing these networks range from private diary notes<sup>46</sup> and journal entries<sup>47</sup> to patient case-studies.<sup>48</sup> These cross-generational seventeenth-century ‘networks’ included figures such as Simon Forman, Richard Napier, William Lilly (1602–1681), and Ashmole but evidence also extends to wider lines of transmission.<sup>49</sup> Many contemporary magicians were sharing information with professional affiliates, collecting and studying their predecessors’ papers, and preserving and developing amulet-craft.<sup>50</sup>

The magical context for amulets included both discourses of occult philosophy and practical discussions of magical techniques. Forman expressed a general consensus that ‘an ymage is the force of coelestialle bodies flowinge and soe ymages worke by vertue and similitude’,<sup>51</sup> and that sigils ‘enclosed som parte of the vertue of heaven and of the plannets according to the tyme that it is stamped caste or engraven or written in’.<sup>52</sup> Although electional astrology is often considered for decision-making – when to make a journey,<sup>53</sup> administer medicine,<sup>54</sup> or even propose to your sweetheart<sup>55</sup> – it also had a firm place in amulet-craft, with scientific reformers of astrology emphasising precise timing in constructing sigils.<sup>56</sup> Again, amulets were not (necessarily) unreasonable, irrational mere wishing-stones: they were complex occult objects whose physical effects could be deployed for efficacious benefit.

To précis our various historical contexts, the textual evidence for the material history of amulets ranges from the personal (diaries, letters, and autobiographies) to the professional (casefiles, workbooks, and note manuscripts), from the theoretical (treatises, tracts, and refutations) to the practical (manuals, grimoires, and handbooks), and from the medical (herbals and tomes of kitchen physick) to the journalistic (reports, polemics, and heresiographies).

Amulets were often considered a nuanced and rational technology: Israel Hiebner’s insistence upon precise timing when casting astrological sigils was highly regarded by ‘scientific’ astrology reformists.<sup>57</sup> Amulets were not incompatible with rational notions of natural history or philosophy. Astrology – and by extension astrological images and sigils – was a form of natural causation,<sup>58</sup> and the nature and effects of the materials from which they were constructed were considered both wondrous and reasonable.

## Substances

In considering the textual evidence for the material history of amulets in seventeenth-century England, it is necessary to analyse how the substances used to construct such magical objects were apprehended, in terms of their supposed essences, properties, occult virtues and magical preparations and utilities. The natural magical meanings of such *materia* are essential to contextualising and analysing amulets themselves, as well as useful for allowing such an historical focus to illuminate wider cultural, economic, cosmological, and social structures and discourses.

While all natural materials contained occult virtue, as 'concerns the Influence of Herbs and Roots, they are not esteem'd so strong as the Metals'.<sup>59</sup> In particular, while both diseases and cures were 'divers', 'Metals do best of all help; being prepared and used in due time and means'.<sup>60</sup> Sigils were cast in metal, and usually the size of coins or medals.<sup>61</sup> One schema of planetary metal identifications became relatively standard: lead was the metal of Saturn; tin, of Jupiter; Sun, gold; Venus, copper; Mercury, quicksilver (or, occasionally, alloys); and the Moon, silver.<sup>62</sup> These standards were echoed by astrological handbooks.<sup>63</sup> Medical sigils attributed to Paracelsus also employed these correspondences.<sup>64</sup>

These attributions of *magica materia* were utilised to attract, infuse, and radiate the necessary astral influences of planetary virtue. Forman codified how the planets' virtues and actions were best utilised in their metals:

Quicksilver hath power of and over enchanting and enchanted. Led hath power over witchcraft. Copper hath power of binding. Tyne against thunder lightning and diseases. Silver dothe preserve and hath power in magik and enchantment. Yron doth bind and command and threaton.<sup>65</sup>

The correct material for an amulet would be able to perform specific functions associated with that planetary force and influence. Moreover, just as a planetary sigil wielded planetary influence via sympathy, so too did it modulate effects of other planets via antipathy. Antipathetic utilities were both protective and curative: 'antipathetick noxious Influence goes into the Metal, then Man, and Man is preserved from the threatening Illness; but when the Illness is already in the body, [the metal] extracts it by degrees'.<sup>66</sup> Likewise, zodiacal sigils were also cast in the metals of their planetary rulers, and their catalysing and retarding effects were utilised for equilibrating ends.<sup>67</sup>

The planetary metals were not merely philosophically meaningful as representations or tokens of the seven planets' cosmological area of influence, as was after all their status as the 'Secundarian Intelligences' before God.<sup>68</sup> These metals were also powerful depositories of active and affective planetary virtues, making them eminently practical and useful. In

engraving or otherwise marking their metals at suitably elected times, one did not simply appeal to the mechanic effects of a planet's orbiting influence or the agency of its Christian angel; one actually wielded some of the collected force of that planet.

Ashmole's records provide ample evidence of these standard correspondences actually being employed in practical sigil-casting.<sup>69</sup> Such notes leave us with a range of insights into his magical process: his decision-making in elections,<sup>70</sup> how he cast sigils in batches,<sup>71</sup> and even details of his consecrations with fumigations<sup>72</sup> and incantations.<sup>73</sup> Textual evidence also demonstrates metallurgical and technological expertise as part of the spiritual or cosmological meanings of virtue inhering in matter. The Paracelsian philosophy of matter contained in *Supreme Mysteries of Nature* provides significant intersections of alchemical theory and practice. This included discussion of practical timing, techniques, and temperatures for smelting difficult metals like iron, advising 'a very strong fire, that the *filings* of Iron may be melted. For they will hardly melt, wherefore some Boras is to be added to them'.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, such occult philosophy explicated 'the Spirit of Mars is endued with a greater hardness then the other Metals; so that it doth not so easily melt and dissolve in the fire' and most significantly that '*it hath the same effect* in the bodies of men, that is, it produceth reluctancy'.<sup>75</sup> These comprehensions of the nature of matter apprehended fundamental material qualities specifically in terms of their beneficial effects on the human body. The sharp, hard, dry, 'grievous' nature of Mars was thus understood to 'cleanseth and mundifieth' wounds. Knowledge of qualities and effects of metals were put to medical use; just as astrological theory was operationalised into magical and therapeutic activity.

## Suffumigations

One further use attested in the textual evidence of natural materials in amulet-craft deserves briefly addressing: 'suffumigation'. As part of consecrating and empowering amulets, incenses – herbs, resins, and roots possessing particular occult virtues – would be burned to fumigate magical objects.<sup>76</sup> Ashmole's records reveal his own planetary incense correspondences,<sup>77</sup> and evidence that these were utilised to make magical sigils,<sup>78</sup> as well as his general casting process involved in such operations.<sup>79</sup>

Astrological fumigation correspondences can be found in manuscript grimoires,<sup>80</sup> magicians' workbooks,<sup>81</sup> and even – as 'savours' – in strictly astrological handbooks.<sup>82</sup> 'Savours' were used to interpret the sensory attributes of natural materials as means to utilise their magical meaning. As Agrippa put it, 'in every good matter, as love, goodwill, and the like, there must be a good fume, odoriferous, and precious; and in every evil matter, as hatred, anger, misery, and the like, there must be a stinking fume, that is of no worth'.<sup>83</sup> The affective language of a 'burning' taste, for instance, was

explicated and operationalised by theories of astral virtue and planetary governance; say, to produce literal heat for (in this case, Martial) magical purposes.<sup>84</sup>

In stirring and soaking virtues through smoke, magical fumigation should also be understood in light of ideas about elemental Air. Plants, being observed to die ‘unless they are abroad in the open air’, were considered to ‘have such an affinity with the Air’.<sup>85</sup> Fumigation was therefore a means to catalyse and innervate plant *materia*’s virtues. Furthermore, early modern hygiene theory held bad air potentially responsible for bodily, spiritual and emotional dyscrasia and ill health. The non-natural category of the ‘Airs’, by which the humours and passions could be regulated, could refer to miasmas, vapours and other air-borne pathogens. Good odour was thought to make good air, which in turn made healthy breathers. Finally, magical incense should be understood in the occult context of the breath itself:

Some suffumigations also, or perfumings, that are proper to the stars, are of great force for the opportune receiving of celestial gifts under the rays of the stars, in as much as they do strongly work upon the Air, and breath. For our breath is very much changed by such kind of vapours, if both vapours be of another like: the Air also being through the said vapours easily moved, or affected with the qualities of inferiors, or celestials, daily, and quickly penetrating our breast, and vitals, doth wonderfully reduce us to the like qualities.<sup>86</sup>

Consecration rituals – especially fumigation – involved and operationalised an affectivity that encompassed both the material and the operator framing and casting the sigil. Furthermore, this context of breath catalysed the power of incantations,<sup>87</sup> which were also used in consecration:<sup>88</sup> ‘therefore magicians enchanting things, are wont to blow, and breathe upon them the words of the verse, or to breathe in the virtue with the spirit, that so the whole virtue of the soul be directed to the thing enchanted, being disposed for the receiving the said virtue’.<sup>89</sup> The consecratory material also empowered the operator, who in turn empowered the amulet.

## Utilities

The ancient use of amulets to protect and ward was still highly relevant in early modern England, and perhaps best expressed in their medical application. ‘Amuletem’, especially those to treat, prevent and cure disease and witchcraft, are recorded from at least Pliny onwards.<sup>90</sup> Albertus Magnus, especially quoted by contemporary medical experts, called amulets external antidotes.<sup>91</sup> In the sixteenth century ‘the wearing of amulets...were preventative and protective measures which were extremely common throughout Europe’.<sup>92</sup> The wider European ‘medical community’ of the seventeenth century had

great enthusiasm for amulets, and 'the revival of learned magic made them increasingly curious about the therapeutic uses of occult forces'.<sup>93</sup>

New amulet-craft from scientific reformist astrologers and magicians such as Hiebner stressed utilising 'Antipathetick Influence' of planetary forces over diseases.<sup>94</sup> Other Paracelsian medical amulets both developed equilibrating humoural treatments through zodiacal amulets – such as a sigil of watery Pisces 'to loose and expel [fiery] Choler'<sup>95</sup> – and further demonstrated interrelations of disease and poison.<sup>96</sup>

Such links between poison and plague comprehended disease as or in venomous corrupting airs. In the chapter 'Of Preservation from Poison' of the *Sixth Book of Physick*, amulets are affirmed as external 'Antidotes' to 'keep men from infectious air'.<sup>97</sup> Once more, 'Amulets hung about the Neck, or born on the Wrists' were 'believed to have a wonderful force against the Pestilence'.<sup>98</sup> One historian has remarked of English medical practices, 'the list of herbs, metals, poisons, amulets, and potions all guaranteed to either cure or prevent the disease was as bizarre as it was lengthy'.<sup>99</sup>

A particularly popular form of magical anti-disease objects were 'empoisoned Amulets, or Plague-cakes': objects used to soak up and draw out miasmatic pathogens,<sup>100</sup> which 'among some of the greatest esteem, are such as are made out of Arsnick, Quicksilver, the Powder of Toads, and other Poysons'.<sup>101</sup> Of these, the Paracelsian *zenexton* amulet appears particularly popular, with Oswald Croll, Johannes von Helmont, Athanasius Kircher and Thomas Willis each experimenting with and explicating many different configurations and recipes for these amulets' validity.<sup>102</sup> These reports offer us further textual evidence, especially as regards shifting natural philosophies of medicine and science.

A further therapeutic use of amulets is found in the array of early modern practices concerned with psychiatric treatment of various impairments of mental faculties.<sup>103</sup> Given that curses and other baneful enchantments were often thought to induce madness, such treatments overlapped with unbewitching services offered by physicians and cunning-folk.<sup>104</sup> MacDonald notes that 'many of the devices and prayers... were meant specifically to be effective against both mental illness and the malevolence of demons and witches'.<sup>105</sup>

Napier – whom MacDonald characterises as a specialist in such matters – prescribed amulets 'most freely among his mentally disturbed patients to men and women who were tempted to commit suicide or apostasy or who feared they were haunted by demons or bewitched'.<sup>106</sup> One such case is found in Lilly's autobiography, concerning his master, Gilbert Wright. Staying in an inn room where a former lodger had killed himself, 'after this night's lodging, he was perpetually, and for many years, followed by a spirit, which vocally and articulately provoked him to cut his throat'.<sup>107</sup> After telling his wife of the suicidal impulse haunting, she secured a sigil framed by Simon Forman, 'hanged it about his neck, he wearing it continually until he died,

was never more molested by the spirit'.<sup>108</sup> Curse-breaking amulets also often provided protection from fairies and other spirits.<sup>109</sup> Along with observing intersections of exorcism and faerie-lore with cognitive, emotional and spiritual therapy, we see such amulets being made by specialists (like Napier) and non-specialists (like Forman) alike, and these practitioners shared their libraries, case-notes, and even amulet crafting materials.

This intersection of psychiatry and magical objects should also give us pause to briefly consider a psychological interpretation of amulets. Some writers argued that when recovering from illness while wearing an amulet, 'Strength of Imagination is the Real Cause'; although even sceptical James Harris admitted 'Roots worn about the neck, have performed Cures sometimes'.<sup>110</sup> Certainly the mind was thought to influence the body in these cases, as a disrupted mind would influence the body to 'languish long in a small disease'.<sup>111</sup> In particular, anxiety over both witchcraft and plague could itself at least encourage susceptibility: fear was a potent enabler of pathogens.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, even to critics of magical cures, 'sometimes Diversion of the mind, shall Prevent a Disease, and at other times a Compliance with, or good management of the Fancy, shall be able to perform a Cure'.<sup>113</sup> A potent role of the physician then was to encourage the patient's confidence in the cure; thus 'tis opinion alone, saith Cardan, that makes or marres Physitions'.<sup>114</sup> Winning a patient's trust became vital.<sup>115</sup> Once more, the imagination – either in its occult elevations of the soul, or its suggestible psychosomatics – was found at the heart of amulets' efficacy. In both case, its impressionable susceptibility and resultant affectivity were key.

While the influences amulets brought to bear – particularly the apotropaic, curative and otherwise protective effects – were frequently employed medically, we should not neglect to examine their more (obviously) magical techniques and purposes. Neither should we be too eager to separate these functions. For convenience and clarity, the following case-studies-in-miniature are organised by magical technique.

## Images

As noted, amulets of this period demonstrate the use of astrological images. Sigils cast 3 December 1651, for instance, depicted '[Jupiter] in a Chariot drawne by Eagles & Ganymede knelling holding a Cup before him'.<sup>116</sup> Significantly, we also have a specific Jupiterian purpose for both this and other sigils made on the same day: 'for honour and reputation'.<sup>117</sup> The eagle was a Jupiterian bird<sup>118</sup> and Ganymede, the cupbearer of the Olympic Jupiter. This design also bears resemblance to an image of Jupiter listed by Agrippa of a man 'sitting in a four-footed chair, which is carried by four winged boys' and also matches the utility: 'honour, and confereth benevolence'.<sup>119</sup>

Agrippa also lists Jupiterian images being framed ‘for prolongation of life’,<sup>120</sup> which re-introduces therapeutic utilities, and certainly accords with another of Ashmole’s Jupiter-Venus sigils. At 8.20 a.m. on 20 December 1677 he hung a sigil around his wife’s neck ‘to stay her vomiting’.<sup>121</sup> This worked until astrological events produced developments four days later: ‘the [Moon] coming to the [square, or opposition aspect] of [Jupiter] and [Venus] / my wife vomited the first time after she had her sig[il] put on / but brought up wonderful thick phlegm / such as was not usual to bring up’.<sup>122</sup> To call it ‘her’ sigil seems to suggest it was made to order – having only the notes for its application rather than its framing we cannot be sure it was cast by Ashmole himself. Nevertheless, at the very least, Ashmole was using sigils to treat others as well as himself.

It was humourally consistent with contemporary occult and medical philosophy that the Moon, as a ruler of watery humours, might cause a dramatic movement of phlegm, especially in a powerful aspect.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, these notes demonstrate sigils were not simply static batteries of effect, radiating their astral virtues in a uniform and cosmologically discrete manner. They were part of the ongoing cosmos-wide web of interrelations. They could harness the influences of potentially disruptive astrological configurations, but were themselves also subject to changing conditions. These could render a bad condition useful: such as the return of vomiting as a purgative rather than disruptive or sickening action. The expelling of ‘wonderful’ phlegm through the Moon’s affect upon his wife’s sigil of Jupiter and Venus seems to have been taken as a good sign by Ashmole.

## Representations

Another sort of representational magic found in the textual evidence is effigies. Ashmole referred to various miniatures and figurines – cast at elected times in planetary metals, sometimes even engraved with astrological characters – as ‘Figures’ or even ‘sigils’.

Between the 6th and 18th September 1650, Ashmole cast a series of ‘sigils’ of Mars and Venus ‘against the pox &c.’.<sup>124</sup> These sigils were made in the form of generative organs, giving us more insight into the kind of ‘pox’ treatment such medical amulets were intended to provide.<sup>125</sup> Sigil operations on 9 September are noted to end when ‘7[°] [Scorpio] ascended’.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, sigil casting on 11, 12, and 13 September ended as various degrees of Scorpio ascended.<sup>127</sup> This pointed and repeated inclusion of Scorpio, which governed urinary and generative functions,<sup>128</sup> further strengthens their role in venereal treatment. These ‘*penes et vulvae* cast’<sup>129</sup> clearly demonstrate the use of morphological similitude by which the image of a thing commands or affects the things represented. This was perfectly consistent with contemporary occult principles.<sup>130</sup>

The clearest accounts of such effigies are found in Ashmole's notes on magical objects to cast to rid his home of vermin:

The Figure of a Ratt was cast in Lead, and made in full proportion, but had noe Characters upon it. The Figure of the Mole was cutt in an Oval Figure upon a Punchion of Iron, lying long-waies; over the back were these Characters set [astrological glyph for conjunction] [Leo]; under the Belly these [Seals of the Spirits of Mars and Saturn] And they were stamped upon Lead. The Figure of the Caterpillars & Flyes Fleas & Toades, were all made in full proportion, in little, & cast off in Lead, without Characters.<sup>131</sup>

Such objects compare to the (pseudo-) Paracelsian Scorpionic 'Figure' of an arthropod that was 'a certain Remedy to drive away all Flies...where it is hanged'.<sup>132</sup> The zodiacal identity is no accident, as 'to chase away Scorpions [and other pests] from any place, they take the sign, with which they have some Correspondence'.<sup>133</sup> Both were made in suitable planetary materials: lead for Ashmole's Mars-Saturn 'Figures', iron for the Martial entomological 'Animal'. Both also featured markings, the iron effigy bearing the formula 'SAPFIOR' on its back. Significantly, even an obvious animal effigy such as this Scorpionic item was also prescribed – in the manner some historical commentators have argued *defines* amulets – to be hung; either from a bed, or 'worn hanging about the Neck with the Head downwards'.<sup>134</sup> Textual evidence suggests the terms 'sigil', 'figure' and amulet cover a broad range of representational objects.

## Text

Markings *upon* magical materials and objects, and the meaning of such 'characters', 'Figures' and 'Letters', should also be addressed. Whether 'stamped caste or engraven or written in',<sup>135</sup> these markings held weighty occult virtue: 'characters being variously protracted, according to the various concourse of those rays quickly obtain divers operations'.<sup>136</sup>

Seventeenth-century English amulets utilised a range of glyphs, from representational pictograms to more abstract or specific ideographic signifiers, to alphanumeric text itself. In this regard, markings somewhat mirrored wider usage of images, sigils, and other amuletic objects; combining signifying and depicting functions – themselves operating via principles of reflection, sympathy, and correspondence, along with catalysing occult virtue inhering in matter – to bring about magical effects and influence. Markings upon magical materials had philosophical and methodological layers of interpretative significances.

Perhaps most common were astrological monograms, such as the glyphs of the seven planets. The centrality of these icons is demonstrated in

Hiebner's planetary seals.<sup>137</sup> While traditionally ideographic, we should note extant pictographic interpretation: the glyph of Venus inspired 'from a looking glass', Mercury's 'from a wand', along with key qualities of the zodiacal signs (such as 'Libra from a balance') being similarly determined.<sup>138</sup> Hiebner's sigils were also marked with accurate representations of the planets based on cutting-edge astronomical data. Depictions of Saturn, Venus and the Moon appear to bear particularly close resemblance to the observations of the *Selenographia* (1647) by Johannes Hevelius<sup>139</sup> – 'the acknowledged authority on telescopic astronomy'.<sup>140</sup> Representational images accompanied occult symbols and magical signifiers. Zodiacal glyphs accompanied other, less recognisable, magically efficacious markings, as with many of the seals in the second treatise of the Paracelsian *Supreme Mysteries*.<sup>141</sup>

At one further level of representational complexity, we should briefly take note of the use of number squares in seventeenth-century English amulets.<sup>142</sup> Number squares, or 'kamea', were 'tables of the planets, endowed with many, and very *great virtues* of the heavens, in as much as they *represent that divine order* of celestial numbers, impressed upon celestials by the Ideas of the Divine Mind, by means of the Soul of the World, and the *sweet harmony* of those *celestial rays*, signifying according to the proportion of *effigies*, supercelestial intelligencies'.<sup>143</sup> These arrangements of numbers both directly represented and abstractly signified celestial forces; forces which could be utilised for concrete sublunary ends. As precise mathematical models of the parts of the cosmos they were, naturally, included on the reverse of all Hiebner's sigils.<sup>144</sup>

Moreover, the tables, if properly prepared, could produce tangible effects as amulets in themselves. The lunar table, if made when the Moon was in favourable astrological relations, 'engraven on silver ... causeth security in a journey, increase of riches, and health of body, drives away enemies and other evil things from what place thou pleaseth'.<sup>145</sup> This geographic specificity is important as, utilising both sympathetic and antipathetic principles, such tables also included a negative form; in this case, 'an unfortunate Moon engraven in a plate of Lead, where ever it shall be buried, it makes that place unfortunate'.<sup>146</sup> We find the deployment of exactly such an early modern lead cursing amulet in Lincoln's Inn in London, bearing a lunar kamea, along with the names and seals of lunar spirits, and the legend: 'That Nothings may prosper Nor goe forwarde that Raufe Scrope take the in hande'.<sup>147</sup> Significantly, this charm contains an error in the number square also found in the 1651 'J. F.' translation of Agrippa's *Three Books*, giving us direct evidence that this tome (or at least its manuscript predecessor or offspring) was indeed being used to perform practical, not to mention less than benevolent, works of magic explicitly and expressly involving magical objects.<sup>148</sup>

## Spiritworking

The ‘supercelestial intelligencies’ addressed in planetary number squares were planetary spirits, and amulets – especially when constructed and decorated with cosmologically significant materials and markings – sometimes made explicit appeals to these spirits as agents of a naturally magical universe. Indeed, W. Paley Baildon specifically described the lunar curse tablet above – bearing the names of the Spirit and Intelligence of the Moon – as ‘a charm invoking the spirits of the moon against Ralph Scrope’.<sup>149</sup> Kamea, through substituting numbers and letters, were in fact used to construct these very seals of planetary spirits, further interrelating occult spirits and forces in representations, symbols, and materials.

Planetary angel names and seals were utilised in the sigils of Ashmole,<sup>150</sup> and such astrological spirits were also dealt with extensively in Heydon’s *Theomagia*.<sup>151</sup> John Partridge, albeit accusing Henry Coley of selling such ineffective amulets,<sup>152</sup> even published a design for an anti-plague sigil including the name and seal of Raphael along with the glyph of Mercury.<sup>153</sup> This seal and attribution are both found in the popular system of planetary angel conjuration, the *Heptameron*, published in the pseudo-Agrippan *Fourth Book*, as well as copied into magicians’ work-books.<sup>154</sup> In this magical system, an amulet or ‘pentacle’ is required to be made and worn to ensure the spirits responded to the conjurer honestly and with haste.<sup>155</sup> We see similar amulets – for the spirits to pay one ‘homage’ – in both contemporary demonological grimoires and even in less formal ‘folk magic’ contexts.<sup>156</sup> Significantly, both of these sets of amulets were in fact found in (the expanded 1665 edition of) Scot’s *Discoverie*,<sup>157</sup> offering further evidence of its use by practitioners as an actual grimoire, rather than simply the cautionary polemic-cum-survey it was intended as.<sup>158</sup>

Like other magical objects, the *Heptameron* pentacle was to be made at an astrologically propitious time, and in the published version to be consecrated with a ‘Mass of the holy Ghost’ and ‘sprinkled with water of baptism’.<sup>159</sup> In text from the *Heptameron* copied into the papers attributed to Thomas Rudd (MS Harley 6483),<sup>160</sup> however, such instruction was scrapped; marginalia informing ‘this was the practice in times of popery... No Mass, nor using any holy water’.<sup>161</sup> Protestant magical practitioners and scribes up to the beginning of the eighteenth century were deliberately adapting and excising Catholic elements of (both old and new) ritual practices; practices used to construct magical objects specifically necessary for conjuring spirits no less.<sup>162</sup>

Archangel Raphael, the ‘healer of God’, was also (in)famously consulted by Richard Napier, specifically for medical diagnostic consultations.<sup>163</sup> While a survey of early modern angelology and conjuration is clearly beyond this article’s current remit, it should be noted the major figures of

seventeenth-century English professional magicians' networks all expressed an interest in summoning angels and other spirits, and most left evidence the following generations studied.<sup>164</sup> The combinations of prayer and magical objects used for such rituals offers further fruitful intersections of the material history of amulets with theological, philosophical, and occult (not to mention political, social and medical) histories.

## Conclusions

The seventeenth century saw shifts in theories behind amulets, but often not their actual utility. Some exceptions might be apt to observe – a popular move towards material explanations of objects' affect and efficacy; experimentation with various kinds of ingredients, especially for plague warding and mollifying; an emphasis on precision in electing and casting. But this material turn did not negate occult actions, so much as reframe them. English magical use and decrying of Christian paraphernalia was wrapped up in rejection of Catholicism, which practitioners engaged with in a variety of ways. Disenchantment did not immediately divorce amulets from their spirits. Ashmole's sigil operations, which had included spirit names and seals as well as Latin Scriptural excerpts,<sup>165</sup> continued into the 1680s,<sup>166</sup> and Peter Smart was working on such material into the 1710s.

Baldwin judges 'the therapeutic use of amulets seems to have been as common at the end of the century as it was at the beginning', also remarking that the decline of the anti-plague toad amulet owed more to the disappearance of bubonic plague itself than 'any fundamental change in the natural philosophy of early modern physicians'.<sup>167</sup> The continuation of amulet therapy throughout different physicians' iterations of their recipes should also be considered in light of an appeal to 'traditional' medicines: in the context of galvanising and utilising a patient's faith in the doctor and treatment, it was easier to heal if the patient had heard of the medicament before.

Furthermore, examination of the work and correspondence of contemporary English magicians shows conjuration being studied, refined and recorded towards the end of the century. Such examination also presents the seventeenth-century people (patients and practitioners) involved in the ownership and movement of magical objects – in their 'social life of things'<sup>168</sup> – as well as transmissions of their materials and texts.

English practitioners have been characterised as particularly pragmatic in their magic and medicine, working with a variety of Galenic and Paracelsian techniques.<sup>169</sup> Nearing the end of the seventeenth century, we see a conscious effort (at least on Ashmole's part) to bring together an English magical 'legacy' or even contemporary tradition, with texts documenting its history, methodologies and philosophies, along with physical collections and cataloguing of sigils.<sup>170</sup> Through amulets, we follow both the proliferation and utility of broader magical sources.

Examining amulets and images offers essential context and theory for approaching a wide range of seventeenth-century discourses, from medicine and the mind to the politics of coinage, sovereignty, and forgery.<sup>171</sup> Magical understanding of amulet materials, and in particular the importance of engraving or otherwise marking, elicits direct occult philosophical comparisons to the actions and effects of the soul of the magical operator. Explicating how the four Elements form compounds in which one Element predominates, Agrippa opined: 'Metals are waterish, and may be melted, which Naturalists confess, and Chymists finde to be true, viz. that they are generated of a viscous Water', and that furthermore 'in the Soul it self, according to Austin, the...imagination [resembles] Water'.<sup>172</sup> The imagination – and, crucially, how its image-taking susceptibilities affected the mind, body and soul – was a key concept in occult philosophy in general, and image magic specifically.<sup>173</sup> Pathologically, an unregulated imagination could radiate all sorts of deleterious conditions on both the subject and their surroundings: the most frequent example of such was that 'the imagination of a woman with child *impresseth the mark* of the thing longed for upon her infant'.<sup>174</sup> The centrality of natural cognitive and passional images and fixations upon an impressionable medium (whether merely upon conscious attention or the person of oneself or others), informs occult conceptions of engraving or otherwise casting and stamping sigils, particularly into materials that could be specifically prepared for their impressionability.

Amulets might well be the epitome of magical approaches to matter. They move occult philosophy of material from basic Aristotelian metaphysics of active, actualising form and passive, actualised matter towards nuanced analysis of virtue as en-mattered and inter-relational processes. These processes also rest upon intersections of early modern astrology, medicine and magic, as demonstrated in the importance of election for diagnosis, construction and deployment of such treatments. Practical dimensions to the material history of such objects, especially when considered in terms of their affectivity, also highlight their medical importance in wider discussion concerning the anthropology and philosophy of magic, in terms of rationality, responses to danger and uncertainty, as well as ecological, cosmological and theological interactions of humanity and environment.

Correspondences of material and markings were observed to best collect, cohere, and deploy appropriate properties and effects from the corporeality of such items. These objects were framed with particular intentions under specific conditions using precise techniques and, crucially, constructed from particularly suitable materials for those purposes. Sigils, images, and other amuletic magical objects represented en-mattered loci of astral potencies, nodes in a porous and contagious inter-relational web of occult affect and power.

## Notes

1. See David Pingree 'The Diffusion of Arabic Magical Texts in Western Europe', *La Diffusione delle scienze islamiche nel Medio Evo Europeo* (Rome, 1987), 58; and especially Claude Lacouteux, *The High Magic of Talismans & Amulets: Tradition and Craft*, trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester, 2014), 13–35.
2. Lacouteux, *Talismans*, 13–14.
3. Brian P. Copenhaver, 'Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the *De Vita* of Marsilio Ficino', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 52(3) (1994), 530.
4. Lacouteux, *Talismans*, 15.
5. Lacouteux, *Talismans*, 14–15.
6. One possible omission is written charms. For more on these, see Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA, 2006), and Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London, 2004), 368–369 and *passim*.
7. Elias Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* (London, 1651), 463.
8. Such as William Thomas and Kate Pavitt, *The Book of Talismans, Amulets and Gems* (London, 2nd and revised edition, 1922); Brian Copenhaver, 'A Tale of Two Fishes: Magical Objects in Natural History from Antiquity Through the Scientific Revolution', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 52(3) (1994), 373–398; Anna Marie Roos, 'Israel Hiebner's Astrological Amulets and the English Sigil War', *Culture and Cosmos*, 6(2) (2002), 17–43; Lauren Kassell, 'The Economy of Magic in Early Modern England', in Pelling, Margaret and Mandelbrote, Scott (eds), *The Practice of Reform in Health, Medicine, and Science, 1500–2000: Essays for Charles Webster* (Aldershot, 2005), 43–57; Anna Marie Roos, "'Magic Coins" and "Magic Squares": The Discovery of Astrological Sigils in the Oldenburg Letters', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society Journal of the History of Science*, 62(3) (2008), 271–288; Jonathan Roper (ed.), *Charms, Charmers and Charming* (Basingstoke, 2009).
9. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971) and Bernard Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs 1500–1800* (London, 1979). See also William Eamon, 'Arcana Disclosed: The Advent of Printing, the Books of Secrets Tradition and the Development of Experimental Science in the Sixteenth Century', *History of Science*, 22 (1984), 111–150.
10. C. H. Josten, *Elias Ashmole (1617–1692)* (Oxford, 1966); Michael Hunter and Annabel Gregory (eds), *An Astrological Diary of the Seventeenth Century: Samuel Jeake of Rye, 1652–1699* (Oxford, 1988). For more on Ashmole and his studies, see 'Bruce Janacek, A Virtuoso's History: Antiquarianism and the Transmission of Knowledge in the Alchemical Studies of Elias Ashmole', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69(3) (2008), 395–417.
11. For such a transcription of a seventeenth-century magical practitioner's working notebook of charms, conjurations and prayers, along with tables of correspondences, recipes, and copied sections from grimoires and books of occult philosophy, see David Rankine (ed.), *The Grimoire of Arthur Gauntlet* (London, 2011), which presents and annotates MS Sloane 3851. See also *A Treatise of Angel Magic* ed. by Adam McLean (York Beach, 2006), which collects MS Harley 6482.
12. See Charles Burnett, 'Talismans: Magic as Science? Necromancy among the Seven Liberal Arts' in Burnett, Charles (ed.), *Magic and Divination in the Middle Ages: Texts and Technicians in the Islamic and Christian Worlds* (Aldershot, 1996), 1–15; Richard Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites: A Necromancer's Manual of the Fifteenth Century* (Pennsylvania, 1998); Don Karr and Stephen Skinner (eds), *Sepher Raziel:*

- Liber Salomonis, A Sixteenth-Century English Grimoire* (London, 2010); Stephen Skinner and David Rankine (eds), *The Goetia of Dr Rudd* (London, 2007), which collects 'Liber Malorum Spirituum seu Goetia' from MS Harley 6483 with MS Harley MS 6482, MS Sloane 3824 and MS Wellcome 3203; David Rankine (ed.), *The Book of Treasure Spirits* (London, 2009); Don Karr (ed.), *Liber Lunae* (Singapore, 2011), which collects and annotates sections of MS Sloane 3826. See also Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford, 2009) for an overview.
13. M. Gaster 'English Charms of the Seventeenth Century', *Folklore*, 21, No. 3 (1910), 375–378; A. R. Wright and W. Aldis Wright, 'Seventeenth Century Cures and Charms', *Folklore*, 23, No. 4 (1912), pp. 490–497; K.M. Briggs, 'Some Seventeenth-Century Books of Magic', *Folklore*, 64(4) (1953), 445–462.
  14. Wilson, *Magical Universe*; Owen Davies, *Popular Magic: Cunning-Folk in English History* (New York, 2007).
  15. Paul Kocher, 'Paracelsian Medicine in England: The first 30 Years', *Journal of the History of Medicine*, 2 (1947), 451–80; Sona Rosa Burstein, 'Demonology and Medicine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Folklore*, 67(1) (1956), 16–33; Allen G. Debus, *The English Paracelsians* (London, 1965); Charles Webster, 'Alchemical and Paracelsian Medicine', in Webster, Charles (ed.), *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979), 301–34; Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1981); Martha R. Baldwin 'Toads and Plague: The Amulet Controversy in Seventeenth-Century Medicine', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 67 (1993), 227–247; Michael MacDonald, 'The Career of Astrological Medicine in England', in Grell, O. P. and Cunningham, A. (eds), *Religio Medici: Medicine and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Aldershot, 1996); Anna Marie Roos 'Luminaries in Medicine: Richard Mead, James Gibbs, and Solar and Lunar Effects on the Human Body in Early Modern England', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 74(3) (2000): 433–445; Lauren Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan London: Simon Forman – Astrologer, Alchemist, and Physician* (Oxford, 2005).
  16. Thomas, *Religion*, 315.
  17. MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 176.
  18. Baldwin, 'Toads and Plague', 229.
  19. Kassell, *Medicine and Magic*, 9.
  20. Valery Rees, 'Ficino's Influence in Europe', in Shepherd, Michael (ed.), *Friend to Mankind: Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499)* (London, 1999), 72.
  21. Baldwin 'Toads and Plague', 227, *passim*.
  22. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (Nendeln, 1979: reprint), 4. Emphasis added.
  23. Kassell, *Medicine and Magic*, 7–8.
  24. Roos, 'Magic Coins', 275.
  25. Kassell, *Medicine and Magic*, 8.
  26. Baldwin, 'Toads and Plague', 230–237
  27. Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000), 139.
  28. Baldwin, 'Toads and Plague', 238–240.
  29. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago, 1964), 45–58, 62–83; Brian P. Copenhaver, 'Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in *De Vita of Marsilio Ficino*', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 37 (1984), 523–554.
  30. Ashmole, *Theatrum*, 464.

31. H.M. Herwig, *The Art of Curing Sympathetically or Magnetically* (London, 1700), 65–66. Emphasis added.
32. Baldwin, 'Toads and Plague', 227.
33. Ashmole, *Theatrum*, 463.
34. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, ed. by Donald Tyson (St. Paul, 1993: 2004), 558. Emphasis added.
35. Baldwin, 'Toads and Plague', 247.
36. Sloane MS 3822, ff. 64–7v.
37. Sloane MS 3822, ff. 64–7v.
38. 'The standard seventeenth-century reference for Pliny was to his *Natural History*, 8.37–8.38'. Baldwin 'Toads and Plague', 228.
39. John M. Riddle, *Dioscorides on Pharmacy and Medicine* (Austin, 1985), 83–86, 159–163.
40. See Nogah Arikha's *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours* (New York, 2007).
41. Napier and Forman even summoned and conversed with its angelic patron, Raziel. MS Ashm 1491, pp. 1303–1309; Ashm 802, ii, ff. 3v, 14r-v; Ashm 1790, f. 116.
42. Most famously, Agrippa's *Three Books*, Giambattista della Porta's *Natural Magic* (London, 1658) and Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1584: and the 1665 expanded edition), respectively.
43. Such as the *Lemegeton's* 'Ars Goetia'. See Stephen Skinner and David Rankine (eds.), *Goetia of Dr Rudd*. See also Scot, *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1665 edition), 229–238; MS Sloane 3825 f. 100–179 written in Ashmole's hand.
44. In 1592, for instance, Forman made his own copy of the *Picatrix* (MS Ashm 244, f. 97), and on 5 January 1648, Ashmole records delivering a copy of the *Picatrix* to William Lilly. (MS Ashm 1136, f. 184). We also have records of Forman's notes from *Picatrix* in his writings and calculations (MS Ashm 244, ff. 45, 97; Ashm 431, ff. 146–146v; Ashm 802, ff. 3–12, 1–2; Ashm 1491, p. 1128), drawing on this text in his own expositions of natural magic, alongside Hermes, Paracelsus and others (MS Sloane 3822, ff. 68–75; MS Ashm 244, ff. 35–60). For more on this reception and circulation of *Picatrix*, see David Pingree (ed.), *Picatrix: The Latin Version of the Ghayat al-hakim*, Studies for the Warburg Institute, 39 (1986), xix, liii–lv.
45. MS Ashm 240, f. 106.
46. Hunter and Gregory, *Jeake*.
47. Josten, *Ashmole*.
48. Astrologers were some amongst the first health practitioners in England to keep patient files in the form of diagnostic charts, which Forman certainly encouraged practitioners to 'look back to'. Barbara Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman* (London, 2001), 58.
49. Such circles include Arthur Dee and his colleagues, who corresponded with Napier over technical astrological matters and for diagnostic consults. MS Ashm 1501, art. 5, ff. 5–6v. This wider circle also seems to include Thomas Rudd, whom Frances Yates identifies as the author of MS Harley 6486's marginalia. Frances Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (St Albans, 1975), chapter 14; McLean, *A Treatise on Angel Magic*, 10–11. For examples of Thomas Robson collaborating with Forman, see Kassell, 'Economy of Magic', 52–53; citing MS Ashm. 1494, p. 62.
50. Kassell, *Medicine and Magic*, 215, 229; MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 213; Josten, *Ashmole*, 1208, 1454–1455, 1663–1664.

51. MS Sloane 3822, f. 81.
52. MS Ashm 392, f. 46.
53. MS Ashm 374, f. 133.
54. Capp, *Almanacs*, 64; Joseph Blagrove, *The Astrological Practice of Physick* (London, 1671), sig. Bv.
55. Hunter and Gregory, *Jeake*, 19.
56. Roos, 'The English Sigil War', 17; Israel Hiebner, *Mysterium Sigillorum, Herbarum & Lapidum* (London, 1698), 178.
57. Roos, 'The English Sigil War', 17, passim.
58. Hunter and Gregory, *Jeake*, 14.
59. Hiebner, *Mysterium Sigillorum*, 100.
60. *Paracelsus of the Supreme Mysteries of Nature*, trans. Robert Turner (London, 1655), 99.
61. Lilly described a sigil owned by his mistress as 'of the bigness of a thirty-three shilling piece of King James' coin'. William Lilly, *History of His Life and Times* (London, 1715), 32.
62. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 75, 80, 83, 86, 89, 94, 258.
63. William Lilly, *Christian Astrology* (London, 1647), 60, 64, 68, 72, 75, 79, 82.
64. *Supreme Mysteries*, 3.
65. MS Ashm 1494, pp. 483–44.
66. Hiebner, *Mysterium Sigillorum*, 160.
67. i.e. a seal of Cancer made in silver, and a seal of Leo in gold. *Supreme Mysteries*, 142, 143.
68. i.e. with God as 'the first *Intellect*'. William Lilly, *The World's Catastrophe* (London, 1647), 42.
69. An election chart set for 11.30 a.m. on 27th July 1651, for instance, confirms Ashmole cast solar sigils in gold. Likewise, his anti-vermin sigils of Saturn and Mars used lead, and his sigils of Jupiter and Mercury were made of tin. MS Ashm 374, f. 117v (Sun); Ashm 431, f. 137 (Saturn); Ashm 431, f. 142v (Jupiter).
70. MS Ashm 421, ff. 105, 109–110.
71. MS Ashm 431 f. 122v.
72. MS Ashm 421, f. 107v.
73. MS Ashm 431, ff. 113v, 115.
74. *Supreme Mysteries*, 119. Emphasis added.
75. *Supreme Mysteries*, 9. Emphasis added.
76. See instructions for the 24th and 25th lunar mansion images: Agrippa, *Three Books*, 393.
77. MS Ashm 431, f. 154v.
78. At 0.40 p.m. on 2 January 1678, 'at this time exactly I cast my sigil of [Saturn] and [Mercury] for increase of honour and estimation with great men / and presently took them out of moulds and fumed them, with [alchemical glyph for sulphur] and mastic', his Saturnine and Mercurial incenses. MS Ashm 431, f. 113.
79. MS Ashm 421, f. 107v.
80. MS Sloane 3826, f. 33v. See also Karr and Skinner, *Sepher Raziel*, 193.
81. Rankine, *Gauntlet*, 257 n. 334–340.
82. Lilly, *Christian Astrology*, 59, 63, 67, 71, 75, 79, 82.
83. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 132.
84. Lilly, *Christian Astrology*, 75.
85. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 23.
86. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 129.

87. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 211.
88. MS Ashm 431, f. 113v. See also Josten, *Ashmole*, 1533 n. 3; citing MS Ashm 421, f. 149.
89. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 217.
90. Various early modern editions were available, for example, *The Naturall Historie of C. Plinius Secundus*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1634), 19.9.229.
91. Daniel Sennertus, N. Culpeper, and Abdiah Cole, *The Sixth Book of Practical Physick* (London, 1662), 34.
92. Alison Rowlands 'The Conditions of Life for the Masses', in Cameron, Euan (ed.), *Early Modern Europe: An Oxford History* (Oxford, 2001), 41.
93. William Eamon, 'Markets, Piazzas, and Villages', in Porter, Roy, Park, Katharine and Daston, Lorraine (eds), *The Cambridge History of Science: Volume 3, Early Modern Science* (Cambridge, 2006), 219.
94. Hiebner, *Mysterium Sigillorum*, 159.
95. *Supreme Mysteries*, p. 152.
96. As when a sigil of Scorpio promised to be 'a most excellent Remedy against all Poyson and Diseases'. *Supreme Mysteries*, p. 147.
97. Sennertus et al., *The Sixth Book of Practical Physick*, 34.
98. Thomas Willis, *Dr. Willis' Practice of Physick* (London, 1684), 109. See also Paul Slack, *The Impact of the Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1991), 32.
99. Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago, 2009), 140.
100. Francis Herring, *A Modest Defence of the Caveat Given to the Wearers of Impoisoned Amulets* (London, 1604), 1.
101. Willis, *Practice of Physick*, 109.
102. Baldwin, 'Toads and Plague', 230–242.
103. For both close reading and statistical analysis of primary sources, see Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*.
104. Davies, *Popular Magic*, 110.
105. MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 213.
106. MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 214.
107. Lilly, *History*, 33.
108. Lilly, *History*, 34.
109. See MS Ashm 410, f. 100 (Sallock); Ashm 211, f. 143 (Rumball); Ashm 198, f. 186 (Simpson); Ashm 235, f. 186v (Hueson).
110. Walter Harris, *Pharmacologia anti-empirica* (London, 1683), 298.
111. MS Ashm. 343, f. 138v; Kassell, *Medicine and Magic*, 169.
112. Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (London, 1621), 2.2.6.2; Walter Pagel, *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance* (Basel, 1982), 123, 178–182.
113. Harris, *Pharmacologia anti-empirica*, 311.
114. Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1.2.3.2.
115. Kassell, *Medicine and Magic*, 148, 160–161, 166.
116. MS Ashm 431, f. 143.
117. MS Ashm 431, ff. 143, 127v. Compare to the general powers of Hiebner's sigils of Jupiter, which 'bring all Sciences, Fortune, Riches and Honour'. Hiebner, *Mysterium Sigillorum*, 186.
118. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 86.
119. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 383; John Heydon, *Theomagia* (London, 1664), 213.
120. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 383.
121. MS Ashm 431, f. 102.

122. MS Ashm 431, f. 102.
123. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 80. For more on the Moon and phlegm, see Roos, 'Magic Coins', 275; Roos, 'Luminaries in Medicine', 448–450.
124. MS Ashm 431, f. 136v.
125. MS Ashm 431, ff. 123, 124, 125, 125v.
126. MS Ashm 431, f. 124.
127. MS Ashm 431, ff. 124v, 125. That Scorpio marks an *end* point to the operation should also be understood according to Forman's instructions that sigils 'enclosed som parte of the vertue of heaven and of the plannets according to *the tyme that it is stamped caste or engraven or written in*' i.e. when the sigil is finished. MS Ashm 392, f. 46. Emphasis added.
128. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 73; Lilly, *Christian Astrology*, 97.
129. MS Ashm 431, f. 125v.
130. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 373.
131. MS Ashm 431, f. 137.
132. *Supreme Mysteries*, 148.
133. Heydon, *Theomagia*, 125.
134. *Supreme Mysteries*, 148.
135. MS Ashm 392, f. 46.
136. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 406.
137. Hiebner, *Mysterium Sigillorum*, 158–180.
138. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 409.
139. Hiebner, *Mysterium Sigillorum*, 162, 172, 176. Roos considers this part of Hiebner's general reforms towards precision in sigil-craft. Roos, 'The English Sigil War', 17–43.
140. Mary Winkler and Albert Van Helden, 'Johannes Hevelius and the Visual Language of Astronomy', in Field, J. V. and James, Frank A. J. L. (eds), *Renaissance and Revolution: Humanists, Scholars, Craftsmen, and Natural Philosophers in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1993), 97–116, 98.
141. See, for instance, typical zodiacal glyphs amongst other markings and text on the sigils of Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, and Leo. *Supreme Mysteries*, 140, 142–144.
142. See Roos, 'Magic Squares', *passim*.
143. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 318. Emphasis added.
144. Hiebner, *Mysterium Sigillorum*, 162–177.
145. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 319.
146. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 319.
147. W. Paley Baildon, 'Sixteenth Century Leadern Charm (Obverse and Reverse) Found at Lincoln's Inn', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquarians of London*, Second Series, 18, (1901), 146, *passim*.
148. Jim Baker, *The Cunning-Man's Handbook: The Practice of English Folk Magic 1550–1900*, (London, 2014), 272–273. This error trail also extends to later manuscript works such as MS Harley 6482, further emphasising the *Three Books'* influence. See McLean, *A Treatise of Angel Magic*, 121.
149. Baildon, 'Sixteenth Century Leadern Charm', 141–146.
150. MS Ashm 431, f. 142v-3 ('Iophiel' aka Johphiel), 133 (Graphiel and Hagiel), 119 (seal of Zazel and an apparent minor variation on the seal of Agiel).
151. Heydon, *Theomagia*, *passim*.
152. Roos, 'The English Sigil War', 17–43.
153. John Partridge, *Merlinus Liberatus: Being an Almanack for the Year of our Blessed Saviour's Incarnation* (London, 1699), fol. C, last page.

154. *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy* trans. Robert Turner (London, 1655), 73–107, 95; Sloane MS 3851, f. 61–74 contains most of the *Heptameron*. See Rankine, *Gauntlet*, 156–179.
155. *Fourth Book*, 84.
156. The Goetia of the *Lemegeton* (or the *Lesser Key of Solomon*) often required that a spirit's 'Character or Seal... must be worn as a Lamin by the Magician who calls him, on his breast else he will not do you homage.' (Skinner and Rankine, *Goetia of Dr Rudd*, f. 103). Compare MS Sloane 3825, f. 100v. Conversely, pentacle figures also existed for protection from and conjuration of 'all spirits', such as those found in a manuscript 'written mostly by a certain Thomas Parker in the years 1693–5', which promised 'whoso hath this about him all spirits shall do him homage.' Gaster, 'English Charms of the Seventeenth Century', 375, 378.
157. Scot, *Discoverie*, 229–238, 243.
158. Davies, *Popular Magic*, 124–125.
159. *Fourth Book*, 79.
160. Adam McLean dubs the collection of MS Harley 6481–6486 'The Treatises of Dr. Rudd', McLean, *A Treatise of Angel Magic*, 9.
161. Skinner and Rankin, *Goetia of Dr Rudd*, 193.
162. For another instance of early modern adaptations of Catholic conventions for conjuration, and wider significances of experimental ritual magic, 'decleralization' and the shifting influence of Protestantism, see Frank Klaassen, 'Ritual Invocation and Early Modern Science: The Srying Experiments of Humphrey Gilbert', in Fanger, Clare (ed.) *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries* (University Park, PA, 2012), 341–366, especially 359.
163. MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 18, 210; MS Ashm 235, ff. 186v–92v.
164. John Dee claimed his interest in angel magic began in 1569 invoking Raphael as well as Michael. Stephen Skinner and David Rankine (eds), *Practical Angel Magic of Dr John Dee's Enochian Tables* (London, 2004), 30; citing Sloane MS 3188. Ashmole certainly poured over Dee's work, and made notes on formulating angelic names from his magical systems, including 'the Names of the 16 good Angells for Phisick' taken from Dee's occult tables of letters; he even started his own journal documenting his 'Actions with Spirits' (MS Ashm. 1790, f. 47; Skinner and Rankine, *Practical Angel Magic*, 44). Kassell points out Dee and Forman drew from common conjuration sources. Kassell, *Medicine and Magic*, 215. Lilly notes that Napier knew Dee 'very well', and MacDonald judges this acquaintance 'surely... induced him to practice' conjuration (Lilly, *History*, 227; MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 18). Kassell also connects the conjuration practices of Forman and Napier, showing the two demonstrably interested in *Liber Raziel* for both theoretical occult matters and operative magical activity (Kassell, *Medicine and Magic*, 221; MS Ashm. 1491, pp. 1303–1309; Ashm. 1790, f. 116; Sloane 3822, f. 24).
165. For instance, MS Ashm. 431, f. 142v.
166. MS Ashm. 421, f. 141v. Josten does not record if these later notes also involved spirits.
167. Baldwin, 'Toads and Plague', 247.
168. Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in Appadurai Arjun (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), 3–63; Kassell, 'Economy of Magic', 47.
169. MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 188–189.

170. Kassell, 'Economy of Magic', 48, 52–53, 55–56.
171. Todd Butler, *Imagination and Politics in Seventeenth Century England* (Padstow, 2008), 47–52.
172. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 23.
173. Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1.2.3.2; Agrippa, *Three Books*, 199–202; Pagel, *Paracelsus*, 121–123.
174. Agrippa, *Three Books*, 201. Emphasis added.

# 11

## Amulets: The Material Evidence

*Tabitha Cadbury*

Physical evidence for magical practice in modern England survives in the form of amulets, of which over 1,700 remain in museum collections. Amulets can be defined as portable charms to guard against negative influences, or to encourage positive ones – a fossil to keep away lightning, a hag stone to guard against witchcraft, a mole’s foot to fight cramp (Photograph 11.A), or simply a silver charm against bad luck. They are sometimes worn as jewellery, but can be kept in the pocket, sewn into clothing, concealed or displayed in homes or in barns, on agricultural animals or on vehicles. This chapter looks at the physical form of the amulets that survive and the documentation that accompanies them. It considers what these can tell us about the people who made and used amulets, the powers they invested in these objects, and what the material evidence can reveal about the problems these people faced and the issues that were foremost in their minds.

The amulets that survive and the information that supports them both depend on the changing interests of collectors, so by tracing patterns in the collection and interpretation of amulets, we can also learn about changing intellectual attitudes to magic in modern Britain. Eighteenth-century antiquarian collectors interpreted amulets as remnants of ancient Roman paganism and medieval Catholicism, contrasting these with their own Protestant ideal. Nineteenth-century scientific collectors understood amulets to be the survivals of a ‘primitive’ mindset, to be compared with beliefs and practices found amongst Britain’s colonial subjects. In the twentieth century, occultists used British amulets as evidence for the continuity of pre-Christian witchcraft. By looking at museum collections of amulets we find that ordinary people used magic to address their everyday troubles, well into the twentieth century at least.

Central to this chapter is a survey of collections. Taking inspiration from Jonathan Roper’s work on verbal charms,<sup>1</sup> I have created a spreadsheet of existing English amulets in museums.<sup>2</sup> Primary documentation that has informed the survey includes words written on objects, labels attached to or accompanying them, display texts, accession registers, catalogue cards



*Photograph 11.A* This holed stone from Herbert Toms' collection at Brighton is labelled directly on its surface, demonstrating the importance of documentation in adding significance to natural objects such as this (catalogue number unknown). Without its associated story, it is simply a holed stone. Photograph by the author. Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton and Hove

and computerised databases, collectors' correspondence and other archival material. A detailed analysis of the spreadsheet, which contains 1,700 entries (some of which refer to multiple objects), forms the core of this chapter. It would be misleading, though, to present the statistical results of the survey without first placing the objects into their historical collecting context. The continuing presence of amulets in museums, as well as the words that accompany them, depend fundamentally on the historical and intellectual contexts in which they were collected. This chapter will therefore begin by exploring the chain of human interactions and understandings that has led to the particular formation of collections and the data that accompanies them in museums. I will proceed by examining the physical nature of the amulets themselves and then explore what we can know about how they were used and the people who used them.

Ideally, we would be able to look at the English amulets in museum collections and find out who used them for what purposes, and how they conceived of them. However, this information (where it is accessible at all)

is buried under layers of selective preservation and re-interpretation. To instructively assess the significance of the objects that survive, we must first understand the contexts in which they have been collected and interpreted. How were they removed from their 'source communities'? Through whose hands did they pass before their arrival in museums?<sup>3</sup> What institutions did they congregate in, and how have these managed and interpreted them? From the choices made by the original makers and users about what objects and knowledge to give or sell to collectors, through the fieldworker's decision about what to collect; from the decision of a curator or institution to acquire an object, through the cataloguing and storage that makes it accessible to researchers, to my own choices about what to include in the spreadsheet – all of these stages affect the information that this survey can provide.

Early anthropologists and folklorists, from the 'fathers of anthropology' – Sir James George Frazer (1854–1941) and Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) – to the Somerset antiquarian Frederick Thomas Elworthy (1830–1907) and the London folklore enthusiast Edward Lovett (1852–1933), amassed objects that backed up their own theories and views of the world. For Frazer, agricultural fertility cults were the bedrock of all magic and religion.<sup>4</sup> According to Tylor, magic evolved into religion and amulets were 'survivals' of the former.<sup>5</sup> Elworthy assumed that English horse-brasses as well as Italian charms were amulets against the evil eye.<sup>6</sup> Lovett looked for 'survivals' of ancient horse worship in the lucky horseshoes that people hung over their doors, and of Nordic thunder-gods in the fossils they used to protect against lightning.<sup>7</sup> He tended to assume that anything 'phallic' or resembling female genitalia – from horn-shaped jewellery to cowrie-shells – was used to encourage fertility 'fecundity'. In fact, just ten of the amulets surveyed are said to increase fertility or decrease infertility.<sup>8</sup> Such interpretations tell us little about what the amulets meant within their source communities, as they were rarely backed up by the words of the amulets' original makers and users.

In recent years, there has been a revival of academic interest in material as well as textual evidence for historical magic in Britain. Several writers have looked at particular groups of objects encompassed by my survey, including Nicholas Saunders on the 'trench art' made by First World War soldiers<sup>9</sup> and Jude Hill on Edward Lovett's charms in the Wellcome Collection.<sup>10</sup> Geologists Christopher Duffin<sup>11</sup> and Kenneth McNamara<sup>12</sup> have written about fossils said to have magical properties. Perhaps the most significant recent contribution to the study of English magical objects has been the Pitt Rivers Museum's *Englishness: The Other Within* project, with its associated website<sup>13</sup> and publications. Oliver Douglas' doctoral thesis *Collecting Material Folklore*<sup>14</sup> adds a material dimension to Richard Dorson's history of folklore as a discipline,<sup>15</sup> while papers by Chris Wingfield delve into the complex biographies of individual objects with magical reputations, such as

a supposed 'witch's ladder' at the Museum.<sup>16</sup> None of these writers, however, has collated an overview of the material evidence for amulet use that exists in museums, a gap that this chapter sets out to fill.

Although the present study adds to existing academic re-appraisals of material magic, it is important to remember that objects do not provide a purer form of information than words – theoreticians shaped their collections around their own ideas. Hugh Cheape, in his study of Scottish magical artefacts, has pointed out that 'hearsay flourished and the reputation of such objects grew over time'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in the eyes of some collectors and writers, every stone with a hole in it becomes a hag stone and every belemnite becomes an amulet against lightning, whether or not the specific object in question has ever been used for that purpose. Chris Gosden and Frances Larson in *Knowing Things*, their recent exploration of interactions between people and objects at the Pitt Rivers Museum (hereafter PRM), observe that 'collections do not straightforwardly map the world, encapsulate cultural practices, or reveal indigenous social relations. They are the result of relationships that are always emerging and changing'.<sup>18</sup> This chapter will examine such interactions between the 'source communities' who made and used amulets, and those who collected them.

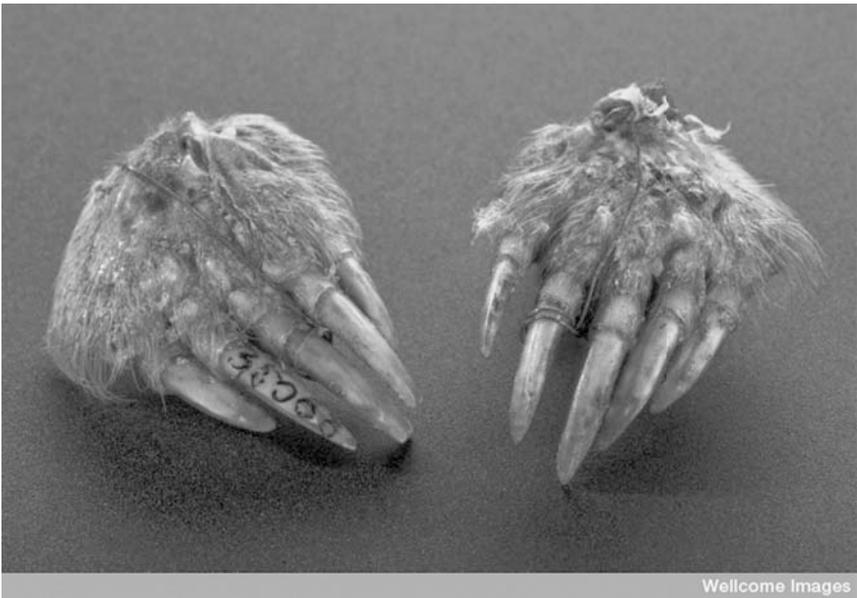
It is revealing to look at the institutions in which the amulets are found today and to consider how and when they got there. The present survey includes amulets from seventeen different museums (see Table 11.1). At one end of the scale we have the largest systematic folklore collection at the PRM (five hundred and forty four English amulets) while at the other end of the scale, just a few objects are housed at older institutions that pre-date the late nineteenth-century folklore movement, the Ashmolean and the British Museum.<sup>19</sup> The major collections appear to have been accumulated by a relatively small network of individuals over a short period of time, during the early days of folklore and anthropology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were rooted in (and sometimes incorporated) earlier antiquarian collections, as well as new material collected using nascent ethnographic fieldwork methods.

The survey reveals over eighty named individuals through whom museums acquired English amulets, in addition to their original makers and users. Most of these people were conduits for just one or a small number of objects. Some are familiar names in folklore and anthropology, academia and curation,<sup>20</sup> while the rest (for the moment) remain obscure. A few names stand out as particularly significant because of their influence or the size of their collections. Edward Lovett is named as the vendor or donor of some two hundred and forty English amulets now housed at a number of institutions<sup>21</sup> and is likely to have been the source of a further two hundred and eighty. The biggest collection made by one individual is that of William James Clarke, a Scarborough natural historian, curator and amateur folklorist. Clarke bequeathed about two hundred and ninety four English

Table 11.1 List of museums surveyed with the number of modern era English amulets they hold, arranged by quantity

Museum	English region/ country	Opening date	Number of amulets	Lovett amulets?	
				Yes (Y)/ No (N)	Other amulets?
Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford	South East	1884	544	Y	Y
Scarborough Museums Trust (incorporating the Rotunda Museum and Scarborough Art Gallery)	North East	1829/1840	294	Y	Y
Museum of Witchcraft, Boscastle	Cornwall	1960	279	Y	Y
Horniman Museum and Gardens	London	1901	173	Y	Y
Science Museum/Wellcome Collection (originally the Wellcome Historical Medical Exhibition)	London	1913	158	Y	N
Cuming Museum	London	1906	81	Y	N
National Museum Wales, St. Fagan's	Wales	1948	42	Y	N
Imperial War Museum	London	1917	36	Y	N
Bradford Museums and Galleries (incorporating Ilkely Manor House Museum and Cartwright Hall)	North West	1892/1904	29	N	Y
Museum of Cambridge (formerly Cambridge and County Folk Museum)	East of England	1936	28	Y	Y
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge	East of England	1884	23	N	Y
Brighton Museum and Art Gallery	South East	1856	16	N	Y
British Museum	London	1759	9	N	Y
Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery	South West	1872	8	Y	N
Somerset Museums, Taunton	South West	1874	6	N	Y
Wiltshire Museum, Devizes (formerly the Wiltshire Heritage Museum)	South West	1873	4	N	Y
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford	South East	1683	1	N	Y

amulets, as part of a larger collection of popular charms, to what is now the Scarborough Museums Trust (hereafter SMT). Clarke's correspondence and scrapbooks demonstrate that his interpretations were heavily influenced by Lovett, from whom many of his objects were obtained in exchange. Frederick Elworthy donated a large collection of objects, associated with his influential book *The Evil Eye*,<sup>22</sup> to what is now the Museum of Somerset; these include about thirty English amulets now housed at the PRM. Twenty-three objects at the PRM are attributed to Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, his wife Anna Rebecca and his niece Dorothy, while Henry Balfour is named as the source for thirteen. Herbert Toms (1874–1940), curator of what is now the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery from 1896–1939, collected about thirty fossils, stones and other objects used as amulets in local rural areas (Photograph 11.B). Toms trained under General Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers (1827–1900), whose other most significant trainee, Harold St. George Gray (1872–1969), became curator of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society's museum in Taunton from 1901–1949, where he accessioned Elworthy's material. None of these collections, however, would have made their way into museums without the intellectual climate characterised by the social evolutionary theories of Frazer and Tylor, or



*Photograph 11.B* A mole's foot carried in the pocket as an amulet against cramp, purchased in 1930 from Edward Lovett's collection (left). It is shown here with a similar example. Image number L0057380, Science Museum London/Wellcome Library, London

without curators who took folklore seriously, notably Henry Balfour (1863–1939), the PRM's first curator from 1893 until his death, and Alfred Cort Haddon (1855–1940), advisory curator at the Horniman Museum in London from 1901–1915<sup>23</sup> and honorary curator at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge from 1920–1922.<sup>24</sup>

Little information is available about the date at which the objects were originally made and used, but we often know the date when they were collected or catalogued, and from this we can infer a *terminus post quem*. The earliest secure date we have for popular English amulets entering a museum collection is 1884 – these form part of the PRM's founding collection, donated by General Pitt Rivers himself. They consist of four Christian medallions, a 'naturally perforated stone, nailed to a cottage door against witches by a carter Rushmore nr Salisbury' and a 'witch post' 'belonging to a seat on a hearth of an old house in Scarborough'.<sup>25</sup> Just nine of the objects surveyed are said to have been in use during the eighteenth century; most were collected directly from the people who used them – or who remembered their immediate predecessors using them – so the dates on which they are known to have been used reflect the extent of living memory. This places most of the amulets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; thus these objects joined the vanguard of social science in its early, social evolutionary, manifestation in museums.

Field collecting of English amulets peaked numerically between the 1910s and the 1940s, largely under the influence of Lovett and especially boosted by his First World War soldiers' amulets (Photograph 11.C), although museums continued to collect more traditional material alongside Lovett's. Amateur folklorists' collections continued to enter museums until the 1940s, but after the Second World War swathes of objects were transferred between museums as their interests and emphases changed. Primary collecting had tailed off by the Second World War as the generation of collectors, curators and academics involved in the original folklore movement passed away. The bulk of Elworthy's collection was transferred from Somerset to the PRM in 1968; in 1984, 418 Lovett items were transferred to the PRM from the Wellcome Institute (now the Wellcome Collection), where some one hundred and fifty remain today. The occultist Cecil Williamson – who moved his Museum of Witchcraft to Cornwall in 1960 – created a new context for many English amulets including some of Lovett's, redefining them as evidence for traditional witchcraft. The re-engagement of museums with their own histories, as well as a revival of academic interest in magic, has led to more English amulets being re-interpreted and returned to public display in the twenty-first century.

What does our survey tell us about the geographical distribution of amulet use in England? The majority of the objects are provenanced, if only by county. Although the collections tend to include items from all over the country, there is a noticeable concentration of artefacts local to the museums



*Photograph 11.C* A selection of good luck charms used by soldiers during the First World War, from Edward Lovett's collection. Image number L0035468, Wellcome Library, London

in question. The fact that fewer amulets were collected from certain regions of England (see Table 11.2) probably reflects the distribution of interested institutions, curators and collectors, rather than suggesting that comparable traditions did not exist elsewhere. London figures prominently because of Lovett's interests, while the North East is dominated by Clarke's collections at Scarborough. Tylor and Elworthy's presence in Somerset, Lovett's visits to Devon, and Cecil Williamson's move to Cornwall enhance collections from the South West. Collections from the Midlands and the North West are small, as no major institutions or collectors in these regions appear to have shown an interest in English amulets.

I will now summarise the physical nature of the amulets themselves, before turning to the purposes for which they were used. The numbers in brackets indicate how many examples have been found. The survey demonstrates that the following materials were used as amulets: natural objects or parts of objects (mineral, vegetable, animal and human), artefacts originally made for other purposes (such as nails, pins and screws), natural objects incorporated into assemblages (such as a holed stone on a string with a key),

*Table 11.2* Geographical origins of English amulets, arranged by quantity

<b>English region / country</b>	<b>Number of amulets</b>
London	416
England (unprovenanced)	342
North East	273
South West	202
Britain (probably English)	183
South East (other than London)	139
East of England	103
Midlands	22
North West	14
France (used by English soldiers)	4

items hand-made as amulets (including trench art charms) and artefacts mass-produced as charms. The survey reveals that stones – with and without holes (100 and 80, respectively) – are the natural objects most frequently used as amulets. Other commonly used natural objects include fossils (81), bones (77), shells (40), and the mineral iron pyrites (23). Animal remains include moles' feet (22), teeth (19), pierced hearts (12), eel skins (9), dried frogs (6) and tongues (3), while cauls (foetal membranes, 7) and teeth (2) constitute human remains. Plants and plant materials include dried potatoes (21), nuts (16), beans (12) and mandrake roots (7). A great many amulets take the form of personal ornaments and jewellery – pendants (about 250), necklaces (about 90), beads (8), bracelets (6), finger rings (5) and other jewellery, as well as buttons (11) and badges (3), shoes (4) and a baby's cap. Metal artefacts said to have been used as amulets include coins (61), horse shoes (22), horse brasses (19), keys (8), pins (6 groups), nails (3) and screws (2). Corks (10) were also popular amulets, used for protection by soldiers and kept in bags against cramp. Finally, there are fourteen written charms amongst the amulets in museums. Mostly collected by Lovett and Clarke, these are said to have been used for healing domestic animals and for protection from evil spirits, witchcraft and toothache.

Edward Lovett's material is so pervasive that it is helpful to look at it in detail and to imagine what shape the collections overall would have taken without his influence. Fewer than a hundred English amulets had already entered museums before Lovett's material began to appear from 1909. His assemblages contain the kinds of amulets that were found in earlier collections, but to these he added several new types of amulet, namely those used by First World War soldiers, commercially-made amulets and those imported from overseas but used in England. Antiquarian collectors such as Elworthy had brought amulets back from the Mediterranean, but Lovett found Italian amulets on sale in London's 'Italian Quarter' and on East End

costers' barrows. These take the form of horns, moons and hands among other shapes, and are typically made of silver, coral and mother-of pearl. In contrast to indigenous English charms, these were used against the evil eye as well as for generic luck and protection.

From the time of the First World War, Lovett flooded museum collections with mass-produced charms, many of which were used by soldiers. Such amulets were collected almost exclusively by Lovett. A high proportion of these were used for generic luck or protection, but some were attributed with the power to provide more specific benefits than earlier types of amulets, for example a frog brooch to aid 'fertility and abundance', a swastika amulet for 'content, love, health, prosperity, courage, hope & friends', and an elephant charm 'to impart strength and wisdom'.<sup>26</sup> There are one hundred and seventy of these at nine museums, making soldiers by far the biggest category of users represented in the collections. Soldiers' amulets were necessarily tiny things that could be worn, or carried in the pocket or clothing. For forty of the charms specific regiments are named, but only a few give personal names such as 'Private White Northants Regiment'.<sup>27</sup> Some soldiers' amulets are explicitly Christian, such as crosses and St. Christopher medallions, but these form just a part of the broad repertoire of objects used for luck and protection in warfare. The amulets used by soldiers range from mass-produced charms to the found objects traditionally used by civilians. Amulets specific to the Great War include those made out of pieces of German shell or shrapnel, metal 'trench art charms' made by convalescing soldiers, and small woolen 'golliwog' figures. The forms represented by commercially-made charms range from pigs and elephants toimps and mushrooms to cars and zeppelins. Forms used in more traditional charm jewellery are also represented, such as hearts and horseshoes. Everyday objects such as buttons, badges, coins and champagne corks were used by both soldiers and civilians, as were natural objects such as holed stones or African beans. Just a few soldiers' charms are listed as having had a more specific purpose, including a piece of amber used against rheumatism, a blood stone to stop bleeding, a duck's vocal organ to prevent deafness from shelling, and mass-produced Fumsup figures to 'save life' and 'avert danger'.<sup>28</sup> Clearly many of the soldiers came from backgrounds where traditional remedies – magical as well as religious – were still in use.

Lovett also amassed objects that took a particular form – especially acorns, shoes and hearts<sup>29</sup> – to which he attributed particular meanings that he traced back to ostensible mythical origins. He tended to assume that all objects with the same shape had the same meaning, which may or may not have been the case in particular instances. His object labels demonstrate that he supposed every acorn shaped-object was a charm against lightning, or at least a relic of such beliefs – his collections contain nearly fifty acorns and acorn-shaped artefacts including blind-pulls, costume jewellery, decorative boxes and an umbrella-tassel. Lovett's own evidence indicates

that not all acorns were used against lightning, as he also collected seven acorn necklaces against diarrhoea.<sup>30</sup> He subjected shoes and shoe-shaped objects to similar treatment, collecting over fifty representations including pincushions, snuff boxes, miniature ornaments, a handbag and many other manufactured items. The majority of these are simply said to have been for 'luck'.<sup>31</sup> A third well-represented shape is that of the heart, of which Lovett collected over eighty examples. While most of these are mass-produced 'lucky' objects, the heart form also appears in more traditional amulets used against drowning, nightmares and rheumatism. Although we can see that acorns, shoes and hearts were long-standing amuletic forms, Lovett tended to over-interpret them as 'survivals' of more systematic beliefs.<sup>32</sup> None of these interpretations are corroborated by information about whether the original users viewed them as such.

We turn now from the form of the amulets surveyed to their usage. Although this approach can tell us more about the mindset of the people who made and used them, the information still comes from the mouths (or pens) of the collectors. We have only the object itself and the collector's brief words telling us, for example, that this holed stone kept away witches, or that mole's foot was used to cure cramp. Protection against illness and against witchcraft is not mutually exclusive, as witches sometimes supposedly caused sickness. Similarly, in some instances the Christian God is thought to be the source of good fortune, but in most cases its source is unclear. In general terms, amulets were expected to 'accentuate the positive': to bring health, love or luck, or to attract specific benefits such as wealth – or to 'eliminate the negative': to protect against sickness, infertility, the stress of a teething infant, accidents, death, nightmares or witchcraft. In order of frequency we have amulets simply for 'luck' (four hundred and thirty five of them, including those used by soldiers and fishermen), most of which are mass-produced charms collected by Lovett. Next we have charms for the prevention or cure of specific ailments (three hundred and fifty four of them, see Table 11.3), the most frequent of which are cramp (82), rheumatism (72), toothache (37), colds (20), teething (19), fits or epilepsy (17) and warts (12). A further five hundred and twenty six are for 'protection' against a variety of ills – for soldiers in warfare; against witchcraft, accidents and being struck by lightning; for the protection of agricultural animals and, in the case of the Italian charms, against the evil eye. Finally, we have amulets said to attract specific benefits, from mass-produced promises of long life and prosperity, to benefits required for specific activities such as a good catch for fishermen, or good luck in gambling. Love-charms (twenty two of them) and objects used for casting wishes also fall into this category. While many amulets were intended to protect against witchcraft (sixty one, including holed stones, pierced animal hearts and dried frogs in a bag) just eight were specifically targeted at countering witchcraft by harming the

Table 11.3 Types of amulets used for healing or for protection against ill health, together with the specific uses to which they were put

Ailment or health issue	Object types used	Number of examples
Cramp	Cockspur, eel skin, hare's foot, mole's foot, moorhen's foot, pigeon's foot, sheep bone, bag of corks, fossil shark's tooth, fungus <i>Dalmania concentrica</i> , agate, ring of twigs	82
Rheumatism	Piece of amber (sometimes heart-shaped), mole's foot, rabbit's foot, animal bone (often astralagus), piece of coal, copper bangle, ring made from a penny or other metal, bottle of mercury, conker, nutmeg, dried potato, seaweed stem <i>Laminaria digitatus</i> , chalk, sulphur, rue, cat skin	72
Toothache	Tooth-shaped stone, mole's foot	37
Colds, including coughs and sore throats	Glass bead necklace, coral necklace, oak gall necklace	20
Teething	Baby's dummy made of coral, necklace made of nightshade, pimento seeds or orris (iris) root, bag of grass, flint nodule, calf's or human tooth, tooth-shaped stone	19
Fits/epilepsy	Dried frog, ash twigs, iron nail	17
Warts	Slug impaled on thorn, various stones, knotted string, elder twig	12
Fertility	Silver screw, phallic stone, mandrake root, artefacts incorporating cowrie shells, buttons depicting toadstools, glass fish charms	10
Bronchitis	Glass bead necklace	8
Gout	Leg- and foot-shaped flint, acorn	8
Diarrhoea	Necklace or string of acorns	7
Bleeding, including nosebleed and healing wounds	Bloodstone, carnelian pendant, orange-red flint, red silk cord	5

Continued

Table 11.3 Continued

Ailment or health issue	Object types used	Number of examples
Smallpox	Coral brooch, stone, holed stone	4
Contraception	Fish otolith (part of inner ear)	3
Eyesight	Bat's wing	3
Sore throat	Coral necklace, oak gall necklace	3
Whooping cough	Human hair, human hair necklace, 'tarred string' necklace (possibly human hair)	3
Earache	Whelk shell	2
Hernia	Split ash-tree through which child is passed	2
Lumbago	Necklace of snake bones, bottle of mercury	2
Constipation	Seed pod <i>Cassia fistula</i>	1
Chilblains	Fossil shark's tooth	1
Childbirth	Sea bean <i>Entada rheedii</i>	1
Increase flow of breast milk	Breast-shaped piece of lead	1
Liver complaints	Stone	1
Miscarriage	Dead bird (swift) wrapped in bedclothes	1
Obesity	Seed pod resembling abdomen	1
Pregnancy	Geode resembling vulva	1
Promote flow of urine	Polished grey stone	1
Rickets	Chicken wishbone	1

witch, and these are of one type only – the animal heart pierced with pins, nails or thorns.

There are also explicitly Christian amulets. Most of the examples covered by the survey are Italian charms, reflecting our collectors' views of Catholic practices as magical. Religious amulets include trench art charms, medallions, and a crucifix used for protection from nightmares.<sup>33</sup> Some of the objects express religious sentiments in writing but display amuletic properties in practice, such as the Lord's Prayer written on a tiny piece of paper that is too small to read.<sup>34</sup> The benefits expected from religious amulets were much the same as those provided by non-religious ones – they were used for protecting travellers and soldiers, against evil and nightmares, and for general good luck.

From the mid-twentieth century, collectors' interpretations of amulets indicate that popular interest in witchcraft grew. In 1941, the British Museum purchased a 'witch's wreath' that has since been shown to be a fake.<sup>35</sup> The Museum of Witchcraft contains, in addition to the amulets and soldiers' charms familiar from other institutions, at least ten supposed amulets that are unlike those found anywhere else. Five of these are said to be love charms, five for protection, one against witchcraft and one against miscarriage. Four of the love charms are made of composite materials incorporating ladies' nylon stockings, while one is attributed to a 'sea witch'. It is possible that these represent a later form of amulet, or one overlooked by earlier collectors, but perhaps they simply reflect Williamson's own preoccupations. He displayed a propensity to label amulets as 'witchcraft' that earlier collectors had interpreted as 'survivals' or 'superstitions'. For example, a 'hammer of Thor' sheep bone is said to have been used by a 'Cornish sea witch',<sup>36</sup> whereas Thor's hammers at other institutions were used by ordinary fishermen, fish workers and sailors against drowning. Our survey indicates that traditionally, amulets were intended to guard against witchcraft rather than perpetrate it.

In nearly seven hundred cases, the documentation hints at how the amulets were used in practice. The statistics show that most of the objects were kept on the person. Over two hundred and fifty of these were worn, some in specific ways – around the neck, in the hatband, hat or tunic, next to the skin, round the finger or leg, or under clothing. Other amulets were hung around the necks of cows or other livestock. More than two hundred objects are specified as having been carried – many in the pocket, some specifically in a purse or bag. Others were kept around the home or in the workplace. Some were hung or secured, most commonly on or near a door or bed (under the bed or pillow, on the bedstead or simply in the bedroom), others on windowsills and mantelpieces, near windows and fireplaces, and in chimneys, on hearths and on railings. Some were simply hung on or nailed to a wall or from a beam. It has been pointed out that all of these are liminal places potentially vulnerable to outside influences such as witchcraft.<sup>37</sup> As

well as in homes, amulets were used in stables and farm buildings, gardens, markets and churches, tucked into keyholes and hidden in attics. They were also found on vehicles as well as on beasts of burden, costers' barrows and vans, and on boats they were nailed to masts and rudders or inserted into fishing floats. Although the present survey excludes concealed objects found undocumented, comparisons could be drawn with examples discussed elsewhere in this book.

Jonathan Roper demonstrates that ritual 'preconditions and postconditions' were often required for verbal charms to be rendered effective, such as secrecy, silence, fasting or prayers.<sup>38</sup> Roper explains that written charms usually had to be 'performed by a legitimate person (often using special accompanying actions and accessories)'.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, our survey gives only a few hints at small rituals required to activate objects. Such actions include pins activated by bending them before throwing them into a well, a coin bent to render it 'lucky', notched twigs rubbed on warts and then thrown away, a stone stroked to heal ailments, a piece of coal spat upon and carried for luck and a dried potato that had to be stolen to make it efficacious against rheumatism.<sup>40</sup> Piercing, too, may have constituted a ritual activation – a toad pierced with thorns to protect against witchcraft, or a sheep's heart pierced with pins and nails to break a witch's spell.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes wrapping may have been part of the procedure used to make an object effective – for example, a 'cramp ring of thin twig wrapped in pale blue silk', a phial of mercury wrapped in leather, and a dried potato wrapped in a piece of rag.<sup>42</sup> Some amulets were activated by their use on specific occasions in the calendar or life-cycle – the first thing taken into a house at the New Year, or an amulet given to a baby, to newlyweds or to sailors setting out to sea. All of these are small rituals by which the user could activate the objects themselves, without recourse to a cunning-person or priest. In some instances, an amulet's effect may have been practical as well as magical – a plastic pendant rubbed on a child's gums to prevent toothache, for example.<sup>43</sup> Only Cecil Williamson goes into greater detail, concerning rituals that he asserts were undertaken by 'witches'.<sup>44</sup>

Today, anthropologists working with old colonial collections try to make connections between the objects and the 'actual or cultural descendents' of the people from whom they were collected.<sup>45</sup> In our survey, over four hundred records have some information about the person from whom the object was sourced, if only their profession. The documentation provides few clues about how the people who used them acquired the amulets, or how they were forfeited to collectors. A piece of coal was 'sent to soldier at the Front for Luck by the sister of a trooper', a fossil ammonite 'given to donor's father by a local farmer who found it in his field', and mass-produced Fumsum dolls 'given by girlfriends and family to soldiers'.<sup>46</sup> We have here what look like family, friendship and love – three reasons that someone might wish good luck on another and give it to them in material form.

Anthropologists since Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) have also placed great value on recording the indigenous name for an object, understanding that linguistic competence gives greater insight into the minds of ‘source community’ members and the ways in which they classify the world. Our survey reveals thirty two different vernacular names used for a total of one hundred and fifteen objects, examples of these being ‘cramp nuts’ (fungal growths) used against cramp, ‘Thor’s hammers’ (sheep’s bones) used by fishermen to prevent drowning, and ‘thunderbolts’ (fossilised belemnites) used to protect against lightning. Early folklorists tended to read too much into vernacular names, citing them as evidence for continuity with ancient beliefs about witches, fairies<sup>47</sup> and thunder-gods, but what can our survey tell us about the actual beliefs and practices of people who made and used these objects? If they were not ‘cunning folk’, does possession of such objects make these people into Owen Davies’ ‘charmers’?<sup>48</sup> The survey reveals little evidence that the amulets were anything but self-administered.

For a small minority, we have the name of the original user or the person from whom the object was collected. It is striking that in those cases where the collector is keen to prove the authenticity of the piece, more detail is given about the identity of the source. So, the fake ‘witch’s wreath’ at the British Museum arrived at the museum in 1941 with documentation claiming that it had belonged to Mary Holt, ‘a well known wise woman of Stratton’. The Museum of Witchcraft holds ten English amulets that its creator and curator, Cecil Williamson, attributed to individuals with names such as ‘Old Granny Rowe’ and ‘Mrs. Sally Semmens’<sup>49</sup> – he referred to such people as ‘Auntie Mays’.<sup>50</sup> Other than these, original users are named for just ten of the objects surveyed. These include a holed stone worn by ‘W. Hockliffe, mail driver on the St Neots to Cambridge route’<sup>51</sup> and a fossil sea urchin used by a Mr. B. Avery from the village of Woodcutts in North Dorset, who placed it on his cottage window-sill as a charm ‘against lightning, witchcraft, bad luck &c’.<sup>52</sup> More usually – though still in a minority of cases – we have a generic description of the user, but their gender is rarely mentioned. Often a trade or profession is given, some of which I have assumed to be female and some male, while others could be either sex (‘a coster’, ‘a fish worker on the pier’ or ‘a traveller’). Most of the objects surveyed could have been used by either gender – those used to cure rheumatism or keep away nightmares, for example.

Just twenty six amulets are specified as having been used by women,<sup>53</sup> but if we include those most likely to have been used by females – for contraception and conception, childbirth, pregnancy, breast-feeding and childcare more broadly – the total rises to fifty. These include the BM fake mentioned above and eleven of Cecil Williamson’s examples, but also a holed stone hung on a bedhead against witchcraft and a crucifix used against nightmares, as well as four cod otoliths (part of the inner ear) used for contraception.<sup>54</sup> Of the fifteen objects used by babies and children, most were worn around the

neck for healing childhood ailments and protecting health – whether to facilitate teething (necklaces of human and animal teeth, pimento berries or woody nightshade) or to prevent fits (ash twigs), sore throats (coral), bronchitis (glass beads) or whooping cough (human hair). At the other end of the age range we have thirteen amulets used by older people – as might be expected, these guard against cramp, rheumatism and toothache, but also against mad dogs, nightmares and hunger.

By contrast, three hundred and eleven objects were definitely or probably used by men, including named individuals and those identified only by their trade. Soldiers are the most commonly represented group – discussed above – followed by fishermen, with forty examples. In contrast to the soldiers' amulets, those collected from fishermen were not mass-produced. They were used against rheumatism and cramp, to prevent drowning and to ensure a good catch of fish. Pieces of amber were popular for fishermen, as were less sea-specific objects such as fossils and bones. Fish hawkers, fish porters and fish workers used similar charms. Sailors and seamen more generally are represented in the collections by over thirty amulets, used against rheumatism, drowning and storms, and for luck. The human caul was most frequently used by sailors, who also used more generic items such as bones, stones and pieces of coal, as well as medallions with Christian inscriptions and imagery. Some artefacts were crafted specifically for sailors – a ship in a bottle, glass rolling pins, and decorative pincushions.

Other trades and professions are represented in smaller numbers – a carter, dairyman, farmer, flint digger, gardener, miner and so on. The class of many is emphasised, whether lower or higher – Lovett's 'waitress in a cheap London restaurant' carried a piece of coal for luck, while a caul was 'greatly prized' by lawyers 'to confer on them the gift of eloquence'.<sup>55</sup> It is notable that the vast majority of users, where specified, are ordinary people rather than 'cunning folk'. The only exceptions relate to a holed stone used against nightmares, obtained by Lovett from an Exmouth 'wise woman', and several artefacts at the Museum of Witchcraft that are said to have been sourced from 'witches', including a bag of bees for 'health, happiness and sweet good fortune' obtained from a 'witch' in Dawlish.<sup>56</sup> Some of Williamson's claims that 'witches' used the amulets in his museum stretch the definition of 'witchcraft' to its limits<sup>57</sup> – his interpretations conform to popular conceptions of magic and witchcraft as mysterious female arts, but our survey tells a different story.

To conclude, what have we learned from our review of popular English amulets, their use and interpretation? Gosden and Larson emphasise that we must 'neither say too little nor too much on the basis of a partial record'.<sup>58</sup> In our case, the objects were collected by the people that also documented them and theorised about them, so the physical evidence is far from objective. Although many of the amulets were recorded earlier in textual form, from ancient authors through early modern witch trial records

to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarian accounts, the material amulets themselves rarely survived until they entered museums in a late nineteenth-century social scientific context. Nevertheless, we are left with ample physical evidence that amulets were popular in England well into the twentieth century, while patterns emerge from the survey that tell us what sorts of objects were used, the purposes to which they were put, and the sorts of people that used them.

What does our survey add to existing knowledge about the use of amulets by their source communities? It confirms at least that amuletic magic was mundane, targeted at everyday problems. As Malinowski pointed out, magic is 'an entirely sober, prosaic, even clumsy art, enacted for purely practical reasons, a means to an end'.<sup>59</sup> People sought what might be termed ritual or supernatural solutions to everyday obstacles without thinking too carefully about how they worked (rationalising them). They used any means available to protect and make flourish their persons, possessions and property – whatever they perceived the source of their fortunes and misfortunes to be. Although Malinowski emphasised that 'the most important part of the magic is the spell',<sup>60</sup> our survey indicates that the popular English use of amulets was even simpler than that – in most cases, mere possession of them made them effective. The amulets that ordinary people used seem to have been self-activated rather than requiring the powers of witches or cunning folk to render them effective. Men used everyday magic at least as often as women, while mass-produced artefacts were as potent as those that appear more appealingly 'authentic' to us today. Amulets with and without overt religious symbolism were used in identical ways. Although Sir Keith Thomas has argued that 'the line between magic and religion' is 'difficult to recognise in medieval England',<sup>61</sup> our survey indicates that it was equally obscure in the twentieth century, even if clergymen and cunning folk were no longer involved.

Collectors and theorists desired deep meanings and sought systematic links between the form of an object and its meaning, but the truth is more mundane. Not every amulet is an example of Frazer's 'sympathetic magic' – while some crabbed moles' feet were used to guard against cramp, others prevented toothache. While folklorists came up with grand theories linking amulets to ancient religion and belief, members of the 'source communities' sought solutions to their troubles through practical combinations of the approaches that theorists have called magic, science and religion – whichever offered them most hope.

## Notes

This chapter is dedicated to my daughter Juno, in the first nine months of whose life it was written.

1. Jonathan Roper (ed.), *English Verbal Charms* (Helsinki, 2005).

2. I cannot claim that this survey is comprehensive, but it includes the major relevant collections and a number of smaller ones that have come to my attention. There may well be further examples in local museums and in early scientific collections. The spreadsheet excludes objects that have been classified as magical but are not amulets, such as those used for divination. It also excludes the sort of concealed objects found without documentation that are discussed elsewhere in this book.
3. One object alone (PRM 1908.11.1) exemplifies how many hands an object could pass through before arriving at a museum: a 'limestone pebble hung behind a door as a lucky stone' by William Twizel of Newbiggin-by-the-sea in Northumberland was collected by 'Miss Humble' and given by her to the Pitt Rivers Museum via the Oxford classicist and amateur archaeologist Alexander James Montgomerie Bell.
4. See Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London, 1890).
5. See Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London, 1891).
6. See Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye* (London, 1895).
7. See Edward Lovett, *Magic in Modern London* (Croydon, 1925) and a number of notes and short papers that he contributed to the Folklore Society's journal between 1902 and 1913.
8. Some of these are more convincingly genuine than others, but I have included them all in the 'health-protection' category of the survey. They include five for assisting in childbirth – two mandrakes (SMT 1946.81, 517), a vulva-shaped stone and two sea-beans (MoW 275, 1945 and 1946 respectively). In Clarke's Scarborough collection there are imitation cowrie shells 'worn as phallic charms' (SMT 1946.505) and a bag with a cowrie decoration said to be for 'fecundity' (SMT 1646.514) – I suspect Lovett's influence. At the Museum of Witchcraft (hereafter MoW) a phallic 'cock rock' (MoW 1018) was said to aid conception and a 'fanny stone' (MoW 275) to solve impotency.
9. Nicholas Saunders, *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War* (London, 2003).
10. Jude Hill, 'The Story of the Amulet: Locating the Enchantment of Collections', *Journal of Material Culture*, 12(1) (2007), 65–87.
11. Christopher Duffin, 'Herbert Toms (1874–1940), Witch Stones and Porosphaera Beads', *Folklore*, 122 (2011), 84–101; Christopher Duffin and Jane Davidson, 'Geology and the Dark Side', *Proceedings of the Geologists' Association*, 122 (2011), 7–15.
12. Kenneth McNamara, *The Star-Crossed Stone* (Chicago, 2011).
13. 'The Other Within: An Anthropology of Englishness', Pitt Rivers Museum, at: [www.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness.html](http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness.html).
14. Oliver Douglas, *The Material Culture of Folklore* (Oxford, 2010).
15. Richard Dorson, *The British Folklorists: A History* (London, 1968).
16. Chris Wingfield, 'A Case Re-opened: The Science and Folklore of a "Witch's Ladder"', *Journal of Material Culture*, 15(3) (2010), 302–322.
17. Hugh Cheape, 'Charms against Witchcraft: Magic and Mischief in Museum Collections', in Goodare, J., Martin, L. and Miller, J. (eds), *Witchcraft and Belief in Early Modern Scotland* (Basingstoke, 2008), 228.
18. Chris Gosden and Frances Larson, *Knowing Things* (Oxford, 2007), 199.
19. The Ashmolean houses just one Christian amulet, collected by Walter Leo Hildburgh (WA1957.80.8); the BM's nine English amulets include a flint inscribed 'thunderbolt', donated by Sir Augustine Wollaston Franks and said to date from the eighteenth century (1888,1110.41).

20. These people include Beatrice Blackwood, John Elmslie Horniman, Kenneth Oakley, General Pitt Rivers, Edmund Crosby Quiggin, William Ridgeway and Arthur Robinson Wright.
21. These comprise First World War soldiers' charms at Imperial War Museum, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery and the National Museum of Wales, 'the Lovett Collection of Superstitions' at the Cuming Museum in Southwark, amulets for healing and protecting health in the Wellcome Collection and a variety of amulets at the PRM, most of which were transferred from the Wellcome Collection in 1984.
22. Elworthy, *The Evil Eye*.
23. See Sarah Byrne, 'Trials and Traces: A. C. Haddon's Agency as Museum Curator', in Byrne, S. et al. (eds), *Unpacking the Collection: Museums, Identity and Agency* (New York, 2011), 307–325.
24. Haddon is best known for his pioneering anthropological fieldwork in the Torres Strait, but he was also an active member of the Folklore Society, conducted fieldwork in the Aran Islands of Ireland, and created the 'Folklore Cabinet' mentioned in his book *Magic and Fetishism* (London, 2010) and now in storage at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (hereafter MAA).
25. PRM 1884.140.361–364), PRM 1884.56.3 and PRM 1884.56.80 respectively.
26. SMT 1946.37, 1946.78 and 1946.8 respectively.
27. A 'lucky stone' (Bristol N 256 (3)).
28. SMT 1946.279, SMT 1946.93, National Museum of Wales 18.170.11, MoW 1567 and 1738, and SMT 1946.131 respectively.
29. Examples of these can be found in several museums, but the Cuming Museum has the biggest collection.
30. SMT 1946.444–445, Science Museum/Wellcome Collection (hereafter SM/W) A665283, Cuming Museum LDCUM1916.001.098–99, 1985.51.192 and 200.
31. Interesting comparisons may be made between the magical use of actual shoes and the proliferation of commercial representations that may or may not have had the same potency. Three shoes collected in London by Lovett and now in the Cuming Museum can be fruitfully compared with concealed shoes. These are: a baby's or miniature shoe 'nailed to a wall for good luck' (Cuming LDCUM 1916.001.041); a 'child's shoe, popularly known as "the golden slipper" – usually hung near the fire place [sic] as a charm for good luck and riches' (Cuming LDCUM 1916.001.106); and a 'ladies' or girls' slipper, hung up near a fireplace for luck' (PRM 1985.51.166). Could these protective shoes bear any relationship to the undocumented ones found in walls and chimneys, discussed elsewhere in this book?
32. This point of view is pervasive in both his published and archival material.
33. PRM 1985.51.520.
34. PRM 1985.51.781.
35. BM 1941.1208.1. See Mark Jones (ed.) *Fake? The Art of Deception* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), 84.
36. MoW 238.
37. See Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London, 1987), 135.
38. Jonathan Roper (ed.), *English Verbal Charms* (Helsinki, 2005), 189.
39. Roper (ed.), *English Verbal Charms*, 15.
40. PRM 1917.53.662.1–4 and others, SMT 1946.162, PRM 1985.51.234–5, MoW 274, SMT 1946.178 and PRM 1894.46.1 respectively.
41. PRM 1917.53.601 and PRM 1985.51.177.

42. SM/W A79914, SM/W A666071 and SMT 1946.180 respectively.
43. SM/W A666112.
44. Williamson frequently provides an extraordinary amount of detail about how objects were used, for example in his label text for MoW 210, a Somerset 'wish stone' from 'Old Meg the Milk', he says that such stones are 'an important tool and must for most working witches' that 'they hold in the palm of their left hand and with the thumb they rub the stone with a forward movement. This they do in synchronisation to the rhythm of a chanted or muttered spell'.
45. See, for example, Laura Peers and Alison Brown, *Museums and Source Communities* (London, 2003).
46. IWM EPH 4894, MoW 187, MoW 1567 and 1738 respectively.
47. Only one object in our survey is said to have been used to guard against fairies, the Scarborough 'witch post' collected by General Pitt Rivers and mentioned above (see endnote 25).
48. See Owen Davies, *Cunning Folk* (London, 2003), 83.
49. Mrs. Semmens is cited as the source for a breast-shaped piece of lead used to increase the flow of breast milk (MoW 1530). Williamson also refers to her as 'Singing Sal of Wells' and as 'a green witch' in his original object label.
50. See Steve Patterson, *Cecil Williamson's Book of Witchcraft* (London, 2014), 198–199.
51. MAA E 1906.302.
52. Catalogue number unknown. This information is taken from a 1939 display label kept in the Museum's archive. Although Toms took photographs of the people he collected from and made meticulous notes including their names, I have been unable to match most of these with specific objects.
53. Most of the collectors were male, which could have restricted their access to female practices.
54. Museum of Cambridge 910.86, PRM 1985.51.520, PRM 1985.51.569, PRM 1985.51.345.1–2 and SMT 1946.397 respectively.
55. PRM 1985.51.690 and SMT 1946.95 respectively.
56. SMT 1946.299 and MoW 262 respectively.
57. For instance, a mass-produced Touch-Wood crescent moon charm (MoW 2542) is labelled as a 'witches' charm', whereas similar examples at other institutions were used by soldiers. Philip Heselton in *Gerald Gardner and the Cauldron of Inspiration* (Milverton, 2003) and Steve Patterson in *Cecil Williamson's Book of Witchcraft* (London, 2014) both give Williamson the benefit of the doubt, crediting him with recording previously undocumented witchcraft traditions.
58. Gosden and Larson, *Knowing Things*, 15.
59. Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Magic, Science and Religion' in *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays* (Glencoe, 1948), 70.
60. Malinowski, 'Magic, Science and Religion', 73.
61. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), 57.

# 12

## Cunning-Folk and the Production of Magical Artefacts

*Owen Davies and Timothy Easton*

The issue of who was creating the apotropaic deposits, marks, and artefacts that survive today is often overlooked or given insufficient attention.<sup>1</sup> One reason is that there is very little archival information available to help us identify the practitioners. We are often forced to assume by inference. So it is often conjectured that the concealment of objects in walls or in foundations, and the incision of apotropaic marks on timber and plaster, were likely to have been done by the relevant building trades, for example. Yet we do know from trial records, newspaper reports and folklore sources, that magical experts were frequently brought in to advise on how to protect properties and their occupants. These magical experts, who are generally referred to as cunning-folk, but were also known in popular cultures as conjurors, wise-men and wise-women, and wizards, were, as we shall see, clearly the inspiration behind many of the witch bottles and written charms that have been found in and around buildings and outbuildings.<sup>2</sup> This chapter surveys some of the literary evidence for cunning-folk's involvement in the creation of the material culture of popular magic, and examines some of the physical evidence of their work.

Many of the apotropaic finds discussed in this book date from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Yet researchers looking for literary evidence for the rituals behind the creation of such objects usually fall back on a familiar set of seventeenth-century witch-trial records and contemporary, related texts as sources. While these early-modern accounts are valuable for showing the long chronology of some of the practices, there is a danger of presenting a static picture of popular magic as practised by cunning-folk and their clients. There are also problems with interpreting nineteenth-century material finds through the lens of sources from two centuries earlier, sources which were created in substantially different cultural contexts. We need to be sensitive to shifts in practice over time as well as highlighting continuities. For this reason, much of the evidence in this chapter concerns nineteenth-century sources, newspaper court reports in particular, which provide considerable detail about the people and processes concerned, and

the varying motives for creating material magic. They highlight the importance of personal imagination and innovation. What we find in the material remains might reflect an individual's invention rather than an assumed, established popular tradition.

### Performing apotropaic magic

The creation of witch bottles provides the most detailed information we have regarding the involvement of cunning-folk in apotropaic rituals that have left substantive material remains. The literary evidence suggests that, more often than not, cunning-folk instructed clients on how to create them, rather than making them as part of their services. A unique example of this level of advice is a letter written by a Cornish conjuror to a client in 1701:

For Thamson Leverton on Saturday next being the 17th of this Instant September any time that day take about a pint of your owne Urine and make it almost scalding hot then Emtie it into a stone Jugg with a narrow Mouth then put into it so Much white Salt as you can take up with the Thumb and two forefingers of your lift hand and three new nails with their points down wards, their points being first made very sharp then stop the mouth of the Jugg very close with a piece of Tough cley and bind a piece of Leather firm over the stop then put the Jugg into warm Embers and keep him there 9 or 10 days and nights following so that it go not stone cold all that mean time day nor night and your private Enemies will never after have any power upon you either in Body or Goods, So be it.<sup>3</sup>

What this account, and other well-known descriptions of creating witch bottles of the period, such as that in Joseph Blagrave's *Astrological Practice of Physick* (1671), from which the Cornish conjuror clearly borrowed, do not reflect, though, is the nature and diversity of the associated rituals that often accompanied their creation – at least in the later period. To give an initial example, a nineteenth-century Somerset cunning-man named Miller advised a client to put into a bottle of urine (from which he had already scryed a diagnosis of bewitchment) seven pins, seven nails, seven white thorns, and seven black thorns. Seven, three, and nine were the most common magical numbers in popular magic. While doing this the client had to repeat, 'In the name of Christ I put these pins, thorns, &c. into this bottle, and I wish them not so much to be there as in the heart of the person that has done this mischief'. This bottle had to be corked, sealed and placed under the hearthstone at precisely a quarter to twelve. In a case from Langport in the same county, reported in 1855, the conjuror read the 37th Psalm backwards three times, while a bottle of pins burned on the fire.

He then produced another bottle containing a heart stuck full of pins. It was tightly corked with pins stuck into the cork. The conjuror performed some incantations and a prayer before burying it under the floorboards of his client's house. As long as it remained there, he said, the witch would be subject to disease.<sup>4</sup> These are the sorts of details that the material evidence cannot reveal. It is, for instance, generally assumed from early literary sources, and the encapsulation of urine in a vessel like the Bellarmine, the shape of which approximates a bladder, that witch bottle rituals were intended to cause strangury. In the Miller case above, and in another nineteenth-century example, however, it was understood that the heart rather than the bladder was affected by the ritual.<sup>5</sup>

When, in 1876, Emma Foot, of Odcombe, Somerset, took a bottle of her mother's urine to one of Miller's contemporaries, Frederick Culliford, he also scryed its contents, but unlike Miller, he put the thorns in the bottle along with a written charm. Instead of instructing Emma to put it under the hearth, he told her to bury the bottle in the family garden plot. 'He also told me that as long as the bottle remained under the earth my mother would get better', Emma testified. Another Somerset cunning-man, James Stacey, instructed one of his clients to bury a witch bottle in the local churchyard.<sup>6</sup> In 1851 a Norfolk cunning-man named Wiggett, of North Walsham, provided a farmer with three phials full of liquid to cure his bewitched horses. He was instructed to break one and throw its contents in the pig sty. The second he had to bury in the garden, and the third he boiled in a pan of urine at midnight to draw the witch.<sup>7</sup> These depositions outside the house suggest caution in terms of assuming that witch bottles were principally buried in the home, whether under the hearth, floor, or threshold. The survival of bottles is much more likely in such locations compared to those buried in gardens and fields. Furthermore, compared with a seventeenth-century Bellarmine, a nineteenth-century broken glass bottle dug up from an old garden plot is less likely to attract attention as a possible apotropaic, and so such a practice may be considerably under-recorded.

The varying purposes of witch bottles also determine their material survival. In the examples above, the witch bottle is an apotropaic intended to ward off witchcraft. As long as it remained intact, concealed underground, the clients would be protected. As the literary sources from the seventeenth to the twentieth century show, though, witch bottle rituals also served as detection devices. The bottles were constructed to draw the suspected witch to reveal himself or herself. In such cases the witch bottles, which in terms of content were just the same as those constructed for lasting protection, were not meant to be kept. Consider the Norfolk man, whose wife was thought bewitched, telling a magistrate in 1857 how, 'a wonderful clever woman advised his wife to put a certain liquid, together with noddle hairs, nail pairings, and horseshoe nails, into a bottle; to

place the bottle on the fire, and when it burst to look out of the window'.<sup>8</sup> During a prosecution brought by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1903, the magistrates of the Bottisham petty sessions, Cambridgeshire, heard how Walter Smith set about curing his bewitched horses. He went to the village of Lode to see a cunning-man who informed him how to perform a ritual that would bring the witch to his door at midnight that night. On his way back, accompanied by a local hairdresser, Smith purchased a couple of bottles and stopped off at the blacksmith in Fulbourn. Here he filled the bottles with 'wash' (presumably the water used to cool horseshoes and other iron implements). It was important that no one spoke during this procedure. Smith then picked up some nails and hoof shavings from the floor and put them in the bottles. Later that evening he bought some pins and needles, and returned home to perform the ritual. So far in this account, it sounds like a witch bottle was being created. But, following the cunning-man's instructions, Smith poured the contents of the bottles into a pan, added the pins and needles, and began to heat it.<sup>9</sup>

We should not assume that 'witch bottles' were always concerned with witchcraft. In the 1860s the Vicar of Bodmin, Cornwall, found a bottle containing pins in a freshly dug grave in his church's graveyard. In noting this instance, his West Country contemporary, the folklorist Robert Hunt, observed, 'I have heard of this as an unfailing remedy [for warts], each wart was touched with a new pin, and the pin then dropped into the bottle.' The bottle was usually then buried at a cross-roads, and as the pins rusted so the warts shrivelled.<sup>10</sup> Such a bottle full of pins dug up today would likely be labelled as a 'witch bottle' when really it is a wart bottle. The location of the find is not an obvious clue to its purpose, for, as was noted earlier, witch bottles were also buried in churchyards.

As we know from nineteenth-century sources, cunning-folk also provided instructions on the creation of similar bottles in love magic rituals. This seems to have been practised particularly in the north and west Midlands, as the next three cases illustrate. In 1857 it was reported that two glass bottles filled with purple fluid were discovered by workmen lowering a road in Holywood, Stockport. An analysis was conducted that determined the fluid was a mix of urine and dragon's blood, and the bottles also contained several brass pins. Dragon's blood, was a red resin from the foreign *Dracaena* tree species, and was sold widely by chemists and druggists for folk remedies and love magic rituals.<sup>11</sup> Reporting on the bottle finds, the *Stockport Advertiser* noted that fortune-tellers in the area were known to prescribe this charm to bring back unfaithful lovers.<sup>12</sup> Thirty years later, a Chesterfield magistrates' court heard how the wise-woman Adelina Westernoff duped a woman into purchasing various charms to draw a certain man to her. One involved a small bottle of liquid. Westernoff said she usually put dragon's blood in it but that it had not

proved strong enough, so she used something else. Her client explained in court that on one occasion:

the prisoner then gave her a small piece of paper the shape of a heart, and 3 pins of different sizes, the longest of which she was to put in the middle, the others at each side. She did this, and prisoner then wrote her name on the paper, and gave it her back. She then gave her the bottle produced, and told her to put the paper and pins in the bottle. She did so and then she gave her a pill box produced, containing a powder which she was to 'teem' in the bottle. She did so and then she was told to cork it up and tie the cork down with string for if she did not it might explode.

In this instance the bottle was kept in the woman's bosom rather than being buried. Analysis of the contents found a 'brown liquid' and some quicksilver (mercury) along with the pins and paper.<sup>13</sup> In one last example from Brierley Hill, Dudley, in 1894, a court heard how Mary Ann Smith defrauded a young woman named Lilian Haynes. Haynes was in love with a man named Ted Highway but he was walking out with another woman. Haynes consulted Smith about 'bewitching him' to get him back. They met in an outbuilding belonging to the Horse Shoe Inn, and Haynes was instructed to go get some pins. On her return, Smith produced a sauce bottle containing a red liquid, no doubt coloured by some drops of dragon's blood. Haynes was then required to drop the pins in the bottle while repeating the following words: 'I wish that Ted Highway would depart from Louisa Jones, and return to me, Lilly Haynes; may he not rest, asleep or awake, until he has done so.' The bottle was kept in the home rather than on the person or being buried.<sup>14</sup>

As we have seen from this survey of literary evidence for the involvement of cunning-folk in popular bottle magic, the interpretation of material finds needs careful consideration. The purpose of buried bottles with pins clearly varied. Location of deposition is not always indicative of purpose. The presence of hearts, real or representations, could concern love magic or counter-witchcraft. The Midlands' examples indicate that 'witch bottles' found in this area might have a specific love magic purpose, though this might only be determined by chemical analysis confirming the presence of dragon's blood. We find a diversity of related rituals in small regions, depending on the professionals consulted. Absence of material witch bottle finds does not necessarily mean absence of practice, which may have included destruction of the evidence as part of the ritual, or because the rituals that did not require deposition in the ground.

Although far less represented in the below ground and above ground archaeological record, roasted hearts represent another significant aspect of cunning-folk's activities. The procedure and aim was similar in essence to

some witch bottle rituals. The heart of the dead, bewitched animal was cut out, stuck with pins, needles or thorns, and then hung up in the chimney to roast slowly. The roasting action caused, through sympathetic magic, excruciating pains in the heart of the suspected witch. The practice was widespread across the country.<sup>15</sup> Like buried witch bottles the slowly roasted heart acted as a deterrent as well as a punishment for the initial bewitchment. Such roasted hearts are occasionally found during renovations, and a fine example from Somerset is in the Pitt Rivers Museum. It is one of thirty to forty found up the chimney of a Somerset farmhouse in the late nineteenth century. They were likely only years or decades old. Another two examples were donated to Taunton Museum, while in 1935 one from Sussex dated to the 1790s was auctioned for £1 12s. 6d.<sup>16</sup> As with witch bottles, regional or individual variations have been recorded. A nineteenth-century Yorkshire source notes the burial of pierced hearts in graveyards, for example, observing that they had to be buried deep enough to avoid dogs digging them up.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes the ritual ended with the destruction of the materials when other variations of the same charm might have led to their survival. In 1860 a farmer from Drewsteignton followed the instructions of a conjuror in Crediton, Devon, and removed the hearts from his bewitched horses, stuck them full of pins and thorns, wrapped them in brown paper and incinerated them in a fire of green ash wood and coal.<sup>18</sup> More details of a similar ritual were related in a Plymouth magistrates court in 1843, where cunning woman Agnes Hill was charged with fraudulent pretences. Charlotte Horn's mother was ill, and Agnes's examination of her urine proved witchcraft was at work. She told Charlotte to go home and gather ash wood from three different parishes, a cockerel, a new earthenware pan, some new needles and pins, and some blackthorn prickles. She was to bring them to Hill in the next couple of days. This was duly done, and Charlotte, her mother and Hill gathered for the ritual, which Charlotte described in these terms:

Hill then said we must kill the cock, and desired her mother to cut its throat, which she did with a razor. The cock was held over the new earthen pan, holding the fasting water [her mother's urine] and the blood, which was mingled together, and then put over the fire to boil. Hill then cut open the cock, and took out its heart, and told her mother to stick seven new pins into it, likewise seven new needles, and nine blackthorn prickles. The ash wood was put on the fire under the pan, the heart was hung up to roast before the fire, and it was afterwards thrown into the fire, pins, needles, and all.<sup>19</sup>

The reference to the use of ash wood in the above two cases is no coincidence, and in an account from Yorkshire, the wise-man William Dawson advised burning the pierced heart in rowan wood.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth noting the emphasis in this case on the newness of the items required for the ritual. This is echoed in another Devon example from around the same time where the woman performing the witch bottle ritual insisted that the bottle had to be new and must never have been washed out.<sup>21</sup> In other instances we have seen people buying new pins and needles not using their own used ones. There is a strong emphasis in archaeological literature on the deposition of items that exhibit wear and tear in pre- and post-medieval ritual deposits, and Merrifield noted the very long, related tradition of the bending or folding of metal objects before deposition, referring to the bent pins dropped in nineteenth-century holy wells and witch bottles.<sup>22</sup> He was rightly cautious about claiming any continuity of practice from Iron Age votive offerings to modern folk magic. The literary evidence shows that we must also be cautious about classifying the items used in witch bottle and heart rituals in terms of their age or status as a personal item with a 'history' of intimacy with the people conducting the rituals.

Another account of the use of poultry hearts highlights the difficulties of interpreting from material finds whether the ritual was performed against a suspected witch or as an act of witchcraft. By this is meant that while witch bottles and heart roasting were acts of harmful magic they were generally acts of counter-witchcraft and not witchcraft – in the sense that the latter was generally assumed to be inspired by evil, spite, and envy rather than protection. The details come from an exchange of letters with a woman in North Shields who accused her sister-in-law of bewitching her husband and his boat. One letter concerns the claim that she had been to a fortune teller, 'and he told you that a dark lady had laid a curse on you, and that she had killed a black hen and roasted the heart, and stuck it full of pins, and thrown a spell upon you, and it has caused your husband's death.'<sup>23</sup> Of course, a counter-spell against a suspected witch was an act of witchcraft to the innocent person so accused.

Concrete evidence for the creation and deposition of other magical artefacts by or under the supervision of cunning-folk, apart from bottle magic, is quite sparse. The display of horseshoes was widespread, and there are some references to cunning-folk advising on their placement above doors as apotropaic charms. It is also clear that the creation of poppets as vehicles for performing harmful, sympathetic counter magic, or love magic, was largely their inspiration. Made of wood, wax, fabric, or clay these usually crude human representations of the intended target were buried, burned and often pierced. It is curious, though, how little evidence, material or literary, there is for the use of photographs as replacements for figurative representations, particularly as photographs were quite widely used in American counter-witchcraft rituals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is little explicit information, however, linking cunning-folk to the concealment of cats, shoes, and clothing, or the creation of ritual marks. But absence of evidence does not mean they were not sometimes the source

of the knowledge or action. It is from an account of the activities of the Somerset cunning-man James Stacey, that we get a rare mention of a ritual *concealment* of an iron implement. The pigs of a man from Crewkerne were ill and behaving most strangely. He went to Stacey who declared they were bewitched and recommended that the man hang a couple of reap hooks under the roof of the pigsty, and also to burn some powders he gave him at a certain time over several nights.<sup>24</sup> The apotropaic properties of iron were well known, and such implements have been found concealed in buildings in Britain and America.<sup>25</sup> We must also be aware from reading the literary archive that some ritual deposits inspired by the activities of cunning-folk, if dug up today, would provide no clue whatsoever to the reason for the object being where it is. To give an illustrative example, we can turn to a case involving the Dorset cunning-man, Charles Curtis, who was consulted in 1871 by a labouring couple named Davis, of Puddletown. Their son suffered from epilepsy, which they attributed to witchcraft. They gave most of their savings to Curtis for his various charms. On one occasion he told Davis that he must get rid of a pick that he had lent to a stable boy, because, said Curtis, 'that was the biggest part of the mischief', meaning the witchcraft. Davis duly buried the pick to prevent the witchery from working.<sup>26</sup>

The one other area where we have strong evidence for the involvement of cunning-folk concerns the production of written charms. Two to three dozen examples survive from Britain, mostly from Wales, with the majority dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: they have yet to be systematically studied.<sup>27</sup> The literary magical tradition has helped the preservation of the charm record, as parchment, which is far more durable than rag or wood pulp paper, was often used because it was thought, in learned magic, to have magical potency. The production of written charms required access to books of magic. We know this because most of the surviving examples consist of a mix of symbols, magical words, angelic names, garbled Latin and occasionally ancient Greek, astrological signs, tables, and adjurations that have their origin in extant manuscripts and books that circulated during the early modern period.<sup>28</sup> Such charms represent a profound development in the relationship between learned and popular magic. The division is crude, of course. Similar principles, such as contagion, humoral medical theory, astrological influence, the law of signatures, and sympathetic magic can be found across the spectrum of magical practice from the medieval to the present. Yet, the democratisation of book magic that came about from the sixteenth century onwards with increasing education down the social scale, the increased circulation of vernacular magical manuscripts, and then the advent of print, created new genres of popular magic. It was cunning-folk who were the main interpreters and conduits in this osmotic process. The possession of literacy and books was an important component in the reputation of cunning-folk, but not all cunning-folk who used grimoires in the construction of magical objects fully understood or

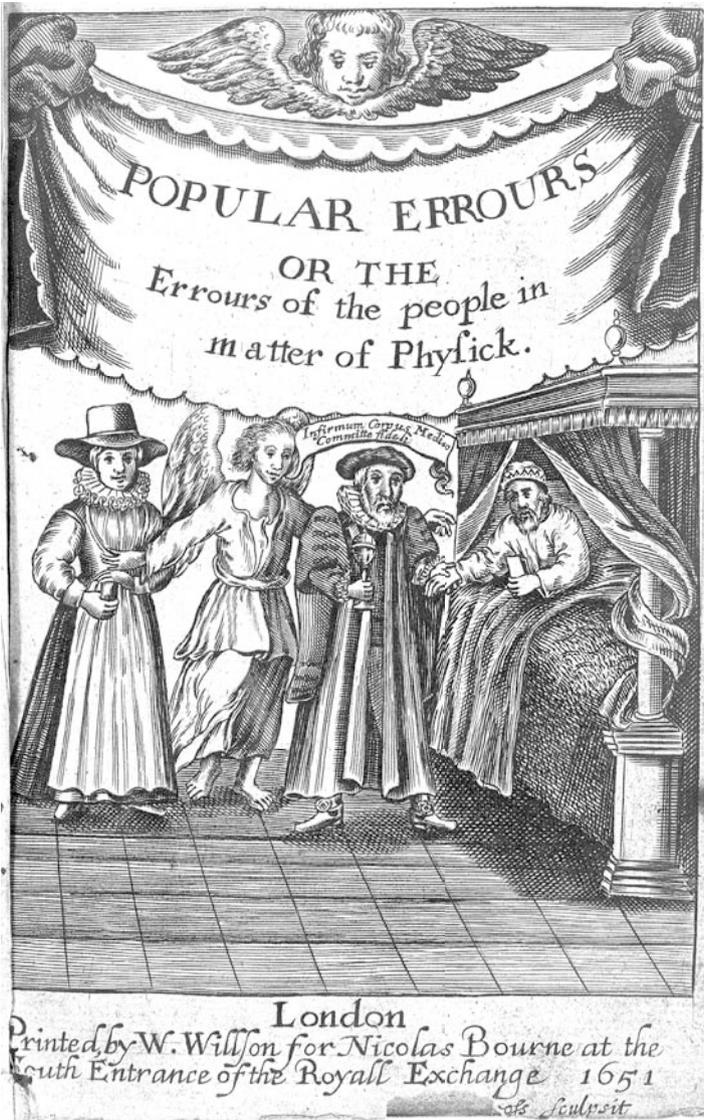


Figure 12.1 The activities of cunning-folk threatened the position of male physicians and were frowned on by godly Christians

were interested in the purposes or details of the adjurations, conjurations and prayers they contained. What they saw was a resource of occult words, images and expressions that they could reassemble as a form of magical bricolage for the immediate protection of their clients.

Written charms were usually produced by cunning-folk and purchased for warding off witchcraft, but that was not their only purpose. They also protected homes and farms from evil spirits, ghosts and thieves. An early nineteenth-century charm from Denbighshire runs:

I who am the servt of H. L. Hughes do by the virtue of his holy name Emmanuel sanctify unto myself the circumference of one mile roundabout me XXX from the east Glanrah from the west Garran from the North Caban from the South Berith which ground I take for my proper defence from all malignant spirits witchcraft and inchantments that they may have no power over my soul or body nor come beyond these limitations nor dare to transgress their bounds Warrah Warrah hare at Q.am balan XXX.<sup>29</sup>

During an inquest in Caernarfon in 1855, the daughter of the deceased, who was suspected of having been deliberately poisoned, produced a parchment written charm in court, which her father had bought from a cunning-man or *dyn hysbys* in Bangor. As she explained, her father had been in dispute with his neighbours over some land he owned, and the charm was ‘for the purpose of preventing them from having the land or the money due to them’.<sup>30</sup>

Sometimes cunning-folk instructed clients to place the charms in sealed bottles and tins and then bury them in the ground. Some were secreted above doors, or concealed above the stalls in byres and stables. One Welsh example was placed in a child’s stocking, wrapped in a piece of printed paper, and placed under the main beam of the farmhouse. Otherwise, such charms were worn on the person, or kept preciously in women’s stays and men’s pockets. The aforementioned Devonshire cunning-woman Agnes Hill appears to have used her charms as bandages applied to the body of the bewitched person. They were written on parchment and lined with calico and were described as containing portions of Scripture, ‘some of them ornamented with crosses and sundry mysterious symbols’.<sup>31</sup>

Cunning-folk’s knowledge of literary magic led to the construction of other material objects other than written charms. If we look through the evidence from the early modern period we find examples of cunning-folk using, or professing to use, their grimoires to create magical objects for high society clients. The devious Tudor cunning-man Gregory Wisdom weaved his influence over an aristocrat, for instance, by offering to create a ring that would give him better luck with the dice.<sup>32</sup> Early-modern treasure hunters produced a range of consecrated magical paraphernalia in their quest for

buried treasures. Now let us look at several unusual examples of material evidence that manifest clear signs of having been created by cunning-folk influenced by learned magic.

### Material examples

Below a hearth of a cottage in Hellington, Norfolk, was discovered a witch bottle dating to around 1700.<sup>33</sup> The contents included twenty-four fragments of a French printed devotional book of c. 1500. Another single fragment from the same source was bound in a tight bundle by a double loop of hair and pierced by a pin. On the upper margin of this page is a mixture of letters, numbers and symbols (Figure 12.2). Here we have visual proof that the bottle was not only assembled with the advice of a specialist cunning person, but included a form of written prescription by his or her hand. The symbols are of a similar form to some on the Woolpit ceiling (described later): squiggly lines with terminal circles (Figures 12.2a, 12.2b and 12.2c). Here we have proof that the bottle was assembled with the advice and help of a specialist cunning person. One of the two bottles in the Malthouse spiritual midden, at Earl Soham, which had a curious liquid inside, was also quite possibly procured from someone providing such a service.<sup>34</sup>

A number of extraordinary candle-marked ceilings have been discovered in East Anglia and South Eastern counties over the last thirty years. All

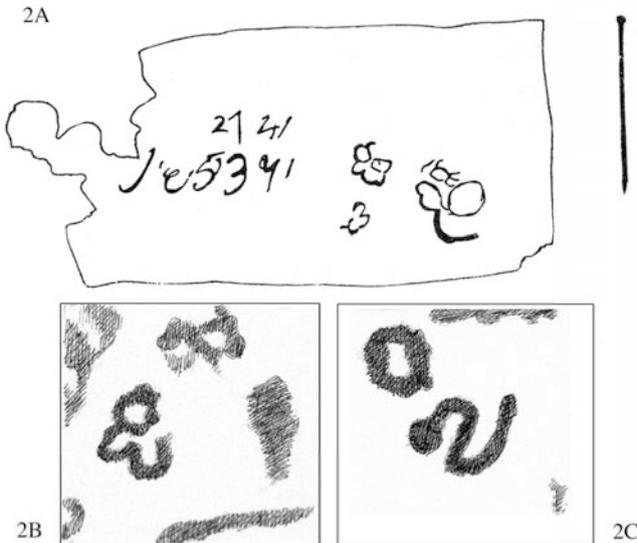
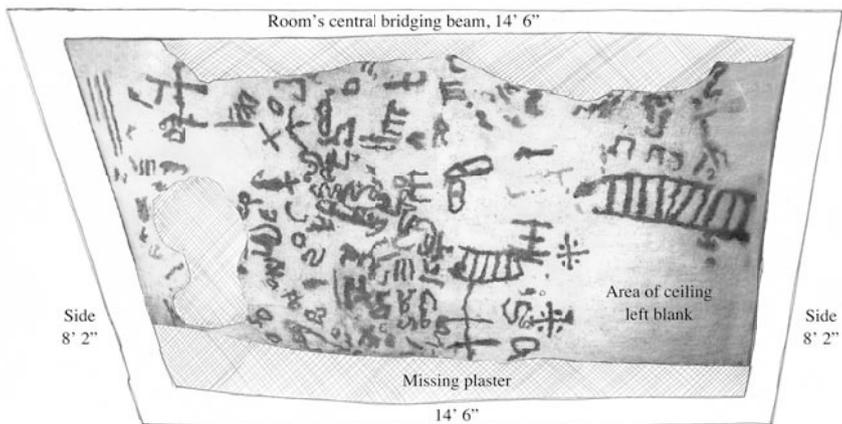


Figure 12.2a, 12.2b and 12.2c These marginal inscriptions were written by a cunning person around 1700, for a prepared witchbottle, found in Hellington, Norfolk

except one are either in the first floor chambers or in attic rooms. The variations of marks used, and differences in their layouts, indicate that many of these were done by different people, although a few show enough similarities to make one suspect the same hand at work. The original names of most of the houses containing these ceilings end in 'Hall', which indicates that they are or were manor houses, lived in by gentry or wealthy farmers during the seventeenth century. One ceiling is in an Oxfordshire castle. Some of these rooms have evidence of seventeenth-century paintwork on the walls, so the effects that today might be considered unsightly were for some time welcomed as part of the room's appearance. We do not know when these ceilings were distempered over so that the symbols were concealed. Because the symbols were made directly on the unpainted plaster, the candle marks are bonded to the surface and can be found in good condition when the later distemper covering is washed off.<sup>35</sup>

As with other objects and written charms produced by learned ritual magicians and cunning-folk, each mark and symbol can appear nonsensical at first. A few, like M, W, other letters, circles, ladders, grid forms, representations of grid-irons, X forms and crosses are understandable in the context of those described in an earlier chapter (Figures 12.3). A moving lighted candle is an imprecise tool to draw with, so the smudgy effect can make some overlapping symbols difficult to recognise. Common features of many marks are curved and squiggly lines with terminal dots at one end. Anyone familiar with scribed letters on stonework around church doors will be aware that these too often have terminal dots.<sup>36</sup> The Hellington charm included examples of these.



*Figure 12.3* Part of the surviving half of a ceiling in a first floor chamber in Woolpit, Suffolk. The other half is now in an adjacent cottage

Many of these ceilings are incomplete, having been subdivided at a later date and with parts in other rooms painted over or destroyed. Two examples had names written amongst the symbols, but there are likely to have been others which are no longer visible. One ceiling, where the legible name is 'Mary Sugate', is in a bedchamber of a gentry house in Great Barton, Suffolk.<sup>37</sup> This is an unusual surname and the documentary evidence shows that the Sugate family lived in the village for a relatively short time. Mary Sugate appears to have been a daughter who lived in this house around the 1660s, before she got married and moved away to a nearby village (Photograph 12.A). This gives a potential time during the late seventeenth century when some of these ceilings were executed.

A poem from a Dutch Protestant source mocking Catholic traditions alludes to the practice of moving around the house with a lighted candle

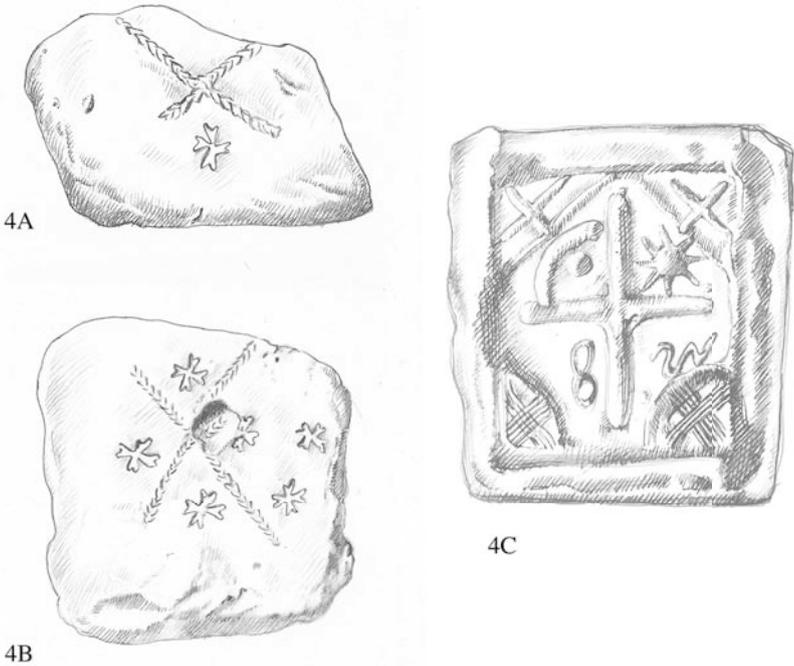


*Photographs 12.A1 and 12.A2* Moyses Hall Museum, Bury St. Edmunds. Poppet found behind walling in Bury St. Edmunds in the early nineteenth century. This figure is better made than many of the crude dolls usually seen. She holds a book of magical writing, which is largely a mixture of unrecognisable squiggles throughout 12.A2. It was probably written and possibly assembled by a cunning person or conjuror

or taper after the ritual festivities of Twelfth Night and marking the ceiling with crosses to keep witches at bay during the following New Year.<sup>38</sup> In countries following the Eastern Orthodox tradition, people still mark crosses over their doors at Twelfth Night with a lighted flame taken from a church for the same reason, and in Germany the initials of the three Magi, C, M and B, are marked over the doors with a flame or with chalk. These all originated from the light of a blessed candle brought back from church, and the habit continued in England into the nineteenth-century with the belief that a lit candle acted as a charm against thunder and lightning.<sup>39</sup> The magical practitioner carrying out such work could be understood as acting as a substitute for a clerical exorcist.

As these symbols so often appear in bedchambers, and in one case clearly marked an imaginary tester over an attic bed, the most likely interpretation is that disturbed sleep in the form of nightmares was the main anxiety.<sup>40</sup> In Mary Sugate's case the ceiling leading off the chamber and over the stair to the kitchen below is also heavily marked, perhaps indicating a route taken by a sleepwalker.<sup>41</sup> It would appear that to commission one of the ceilings it was thought necessary to ask a reputable specialist to visit, and possibly stay over in the room to exorcise it from the harmful spirit presence causing the problem. Because of the special arrangements for a home visit by an individual, perhaps with a distinct reputation, and the fact that these ceilings are not found in houses at a lower social level, two conclusions may be suggested. Either great expense was required to commission one of these cunning-folk, or he/she would limit his work to houses and families of a certain social class. There are no equivalent examples of such candle mark magic from the nineteenth century.

Nightmares of a different sort may explain why an engraved, lead, roughly rectangular cube might have been hung up. This object is approximately two inches (5cm) square on its widest surface, and has symbols on all of its faces: these are variations of scribed X symbols surrounded by little incuse star forms (Figures 12.4a and 12.4c). The lines for each arm of the Xs are made using a technique associated with graffiti found on many Church lead roofs from the seventeenth century up to the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> This is done by 'walking' an angled, narrow chisel-like bradawl from side to side as the inscribed lines are made. The amulet was found in a field in Hertfordshire. It has a hole on one edge, which suggests that it would have been suspended, either on a person, above a bed or perhaps in a stable to protect the animals. If the latter, this is a sophisticated form of hag-stone. A belief, recorded by John Aubrey in his *Miscellanies* of 1696, was that when a horse was found to be sweating and lathering from the mouth first thing in the morning, it had been hag-ridden by witches during the night.<sup>43</sup> Like humans, horses do also suffer from bad dreams: this is the likely reason for their early morning state.



*Figures 12.4* (a) and (b) Two sides of a lead charm from Hertfordshire, roughly rectangular and marked on all surfaces with X forms and incise star-like 'Greek' crosses. Made to be either worn or hung up, probably to prevent nightmares. (c) A chalk matrix from Yorkshire to cast lead tablets with magical symbols. Described as an amulet to avert the evil eye. York Castle Museum

As with the above, some other lead objects with symbols that have been found in fields by metal detecting in recent years are likely to have been made by cunning men. Letters or symbols have been scribed on pieces of lead since at least the Roman period: usually this was done to make a curse against someone, and the inscribed object was then rolled or folded and buried in the ground, preferably close to a buried person or nailed to a post.<sup>44</sup> There is reason to believe the object described next might have been a curse; the third might possibly be part of a cunning man's kit.

The second lead object is a small flat square tablet, approximately four inches square (10 cm) and covered with engravings (Photograph 12.B). It was found in a field beside Manor Farm, West Dereham, Norfolk, once owned by West Dereham Abbey and weighs just under half a pound (25 kg).<sup>45</sup> The engraver has lightly drawn some parallel lines in a horizontal direction and subdivided these with additional staggered vertical lines into 'boxes'



*Photograph 12.B* Part of the candle marked ceiling in Great Barton, Suffolk circa 1660, that includes the name of the Sugate's daughter, Mary several times

of different dimensions. In each 'box' are either groups or single, deeply engraved, symbols, coded letters, or 'numbers'. Two horizontal zones have in the one vertical zone a series using the number eight, one above the other. This 'number' also appears in the chalk matrix for making a similar lead amulet, described below (Figure 12.4c). Next to the eights is a vertical row of backward R symbols; this form is both seen presented correctly and reversed on some candle marked ceilings, such as the one shown here from Woolpit (Figure 12.3), and is also illustrated on the sloping ceiling over the stair at Great Barton.<sup>46</sup> In the second parallel upright zone there are distinctive and different symbols. These comprise a diagrammatic sun; a mask-like face; a star shaped with eight lines radiating from a centre point, each of which ends in terminal dots and a horizontal bar with three short horizontal lines. Although there are no obvious cursing symbols or the name of a person to be cursed, there is one possible word intended: when the image is flipped, so the sun is upside down, the word SOL appears to the left of it. Much else here seems to be mumbo jumbo and with close analysis a few of the symbols are nothing more than letters, stretched,

contracted, placed on their side or reversed. In the top line as illustrated are two letters which resemble a 'y' and a 'g', as would be written in the sixteenth century. Like so much else concocted by cunning-folk, it would seem they adapted earlier written material, which they may not have fully understood, or simply made it up as they went along.<sup>47</sup> There are a few features which at first might show this was intended to be a curse. Lead was chosen for its astrological associations with the unlucky planet Saturn. The lines might also represent a network, intended to bind the recipient. There is also a deliberate cut line, a mutilation near one corner, and at the corner below or above, depending which way this is to be 'read', there is a square 'nail-hole'. It is usually believed that such a hole is evidence of the curse having been fixed to a post by the client. This seems unlikely in this instance, in view of the fact that there is no furling on the back. The hole could have been prepared by a cunning person who cleaned off the furling. As this tablet does not seem to have been suspended, burial would seem more likely, although there are no signs of folding. Folding would normally be done by the cunning person with the injunction to the client

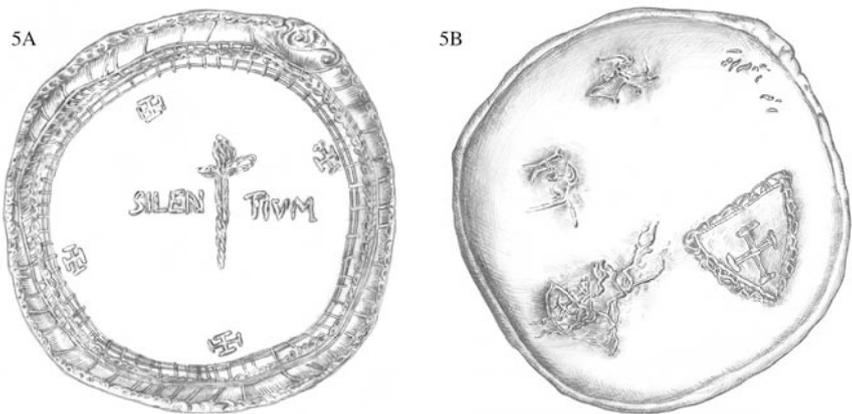


*Photograph 12.C* A lead tablet from West Dereham, Norfolk, inscribed with magical symbols possibly in preparation for an unknown use

that this should not be unsealed, unfolded or read. The contents would therefore be unknown to the client; so it seems possible this is an amulet rather than a curse and was prepared in advance of a request, but possibly never put to use.

The last is a small, crudely engraved, shallow cup found in a heap of excavated spoil near Mildenhall, Suffolk (Figures 12.5a and 12.5b).<sup>48</sup> This has an extended off-centre decorated lug for a handle to be held between thumb and finger. Prominent in the centre is the word SILENTIUM, divided by a sword to form a cross. If the cunning person holding the handle with their left hand offered the cup angled towards another person before them when it was empty, this central engraving would have appeared correctly placed with the sword exactly vertical, and could have acted like a warning not to speak about what had taken place. Four evenly-placed crutch crosses, (crosses potent) are positioned like compass marks, but this suggested second cross is offset from the sword cross at the centre. In order for this to be understood as a mysterious object, various engravings have been added to the outside of the cup.

There is a shield with a central cross potent; a design which could be imagined as a contracted animal figure; a similar sized symbol above it off the centre that could be imaginatively made-up hieroglyphics; some squiggly lines which are comparatively formless; and a mask-like head with 'antlers': this may represent a standing or squatting animal figure, or even a human in animal guise for it appears to be holding a shield, again with a cross potent. Because each of these is upside down when the bowl is the right



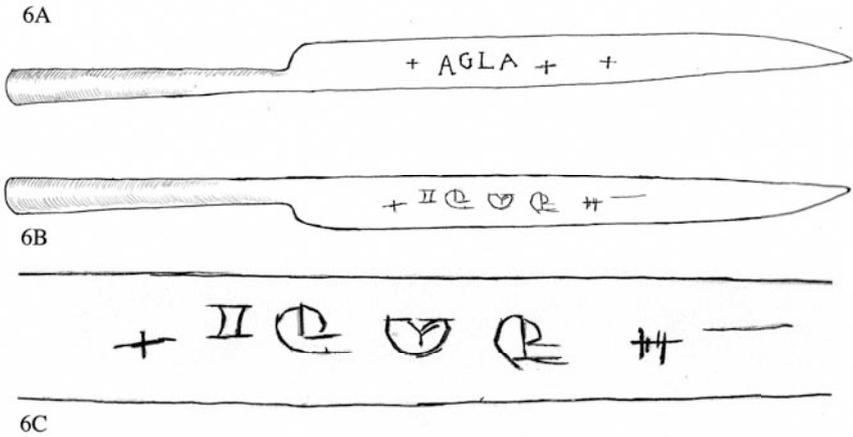
*Figure 12.5* (a) and (b) Moyses Hall Museum. Both sides of an engraved cup with a lugged handle, probably prepared and used by a cunning person. Found on a spoil heap in Mildenhall, Suffolk

way up, these symbols would only make sense if the cup was inverted at the start or end of the procedure. These are evidently designs meant to impress or baffle the observer and add gravitas to the proceedings. These objects are not of the same quality as the sophisticated equipment used by 'high class' learned magicians such as the famed John Dee, now in the British Museum. The more 'home-made' equipment from Mildenhall was made by or for a magician at the lower end of this tradition a century or so after Dee, but possibly a cut above the local cunning man or woman. Certainly, elements of the design-work around the lead rim are reminiscent of the gadrooning done around the silver rims of seventeenth-century precious bowls of exotic materials, like tortoiseshell.

To form lead objects like these a simple crucible is needed to melt the metal, and a matrix must be carved out of some material to receive the molten lead. There is a chalk mould for the production of amulets, said to be for averting the evil eye, in the York Castle Museum collection (Figure 12.4c). This shallow, flat, square matrix was carved out first. It has four symbols, one set in each quarter angle of a prominent central square-set cross; the top two represent the sun and moon and the lower two are of the type of squiggle seen on the Woolpit ceiling and a prominent 8, like the row of those on the square flat charm described above. Finally, set around the outer angles, are four X forms.<sup>49</sup> When cast, these lead amulets would have been like Figure 12.3, apart from the fact that the surface of this piece was engraved into, making it unique, whilst the objects cast from the chalk mould would all have been identical.

Broken knife blades are not uncommonly found pushed into cracks in walls and around fireplaces, along with other sharp forms of pointed wooden sticks. No doubt this was to inflict harm on a feared person or a spirit passing nearby. These, then, are the poor man's version of commissioning a more specific object from a sorcerer. Ralph Merrifield illustrated one such engraved iron knife with special symbols applied on both sides by a magician.<sup>50</sup> Engraved on one side with the cabbalistic name of power, AGLA, and three crosses (Figure 12.6a), the reverse of the blade is also marked with three crosses and four magical symbols, one of which resembles a heart (Figure 12.6b). Close examination of the lines forming each symbol shows the difficulty this individual had in chasing into such hardened steel (Figure 12.6c). Forming the rounded heart-shaped symbol had to be done with short angled lines, which were sometimes doubled; this was no doubt because occasionally the positioned chisel jumped sideways when struck and formed the first line in the wrong position. Other symbols also show the same faults. The handle is formed in one piece with the blade indicating this must have been made around 1600.

Other material, at first not seemingly obvious as having been produced by, or with the advice of, a cunning man, might have had more significance to the house owner if it had been assembled by a specialist, rather than



Figures 12.6a, 12.6b and 12.6c An engraved knife made around 1600 or before. From an unknown source and formerly in a private collection in Kent. Redrawn from photographs belonging to the late Ralph Merrifield

being home-made. Two items, quite different from the familiar marks and objects usually encountered and described in the chapters on apotropaic symbols and spiritual middens, might have come from, or been made by, cunning people. The playing card from Worlingworth (see the 'Apotropaic Symbols' chapter), using the nine of diamonds, appears relatively mundane, although this card has had particular significance for some people since the early eighteenth century.<sup>51</sup> With the addition of the three pins piercing it this gave it an extra magical dimension with the triple enforcement; so too the chicken mounted on a log and lowered to the base of the triangular 'tomb' in one of the spiritual middens in Hestley Hall (see 'Spiritual Middens' chapter). The discovery of a chicken's carcass is not too great a surprise, but this assemblage is highly unusual, the more so because most objects were thrown into the shafts and were not generally specially prepared beforehand. This offering could not have survived the fall even for a short distance of four feet without the fowl turning upside down or on its side, or being dislodged from its log. Some care has been exercised in both the making and placement of this 'offering'.

The magic symbols are the most convincing clues to the involvement of a magician in the production of certain apotropaic items. However, a host of other offerings discovered hidden in buildings may well have been originally imbued with extra powers for the owners having been prepared by, or with the advice of, cunning folk.

## Conclusion

The surviving material culture of popular magic is a hugely important source for understanding the nature and diversity of domestic apotropaic rituals, but it usually tells us little about how, by whom and under what influences the objects were created, concealed, and buried. The literary sources are clear, however, that their creation were ‘popular’ magical practices in the sense that they were primarily mediated by cunning-folk for a clientele that extended from the very poorest to the relatively wealthy. The surviving objects sometimes represent the whole story of a ritual, but as we have seen, sometimes they are merely elements of a much more complex ritual of intangible words, actions and interactions. In a fairly competitive market, cunning-folk lived on their wits, knowledge and imagination, and, to mangle an old phrase, in this context personal invention was the mother of magical tradition.

## Notes

1. See Owen Davies, ‘The Material Culture of Post-Medieval Domestic Magic in Europe: Evidence, Comparisons and Interpretations’, in Boschung, Dietrich and Bremmer, Jan (eds), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn, 2015), 408–409.
2. On eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cunning folk see, Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk: Popular Magic in English History* (London, 2003); Owen Davies, ‘Cunning-Folk in England and Wales during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *Rural History*, 8 (1997), 93–109; Owen Davies, ‘Cunning-Folk in the Medical Market-Place during the Nineteenth Century’, *Medical History*, 43 (1999), 55–73; Ronald Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford, 1999), 86–111; Richard Allen, ‘Wizards or Charlatans, Doctors or Herbalists? An Appraisal of the “Cunning-Men” of Cwrt-y-Cadno, Carmarthenshire’, *North American Journal of Welsh Studies*, 1 (2001), 67–85; Jason Semmens, *Tammy Blee’s Cabalistic Agency: Witchcraft and Popular Magic in History and Interpretation* (privately published, 2014); Jason Semmens, ‘“An Incurable Rogue”: Notes on the Career of William Rapson Oates (1842–1905), Herbalist’, *Old Cornwall*, 14(10) (2014) 32–43; Lisa Tallis, ‘The Conjuror, the Fairy, the Devil and the Preacher: Witchcraft, Popular Magic and Religion in Wales, 1700–1905’, Ph.D. thesis, University of Wales (Swansea, 2007); Tom Waters, ‘Belief in Witchcraft in Oxfordshire and Warwickshire, c. 1860–1900: The Evidence of the Newspaper Archive’, *Midland History*, 34 (2009), 98–116.
3. Cornwall Record Office No. X268/83; Jason Semmens, ‘The Usage of Witch-Bottles and Apotropaic Charms in Cornwall’, *Old Cornwall*, 12(6) (2000), 25 – 30.
4. Davies, *A People Bewitched*, 58; *Wells Journal*, 10 February 1855. A Cornish example of a bottle with pins stuck in the cork is recorded in Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, 180–181.
5. The heart was also the target in a Devon instance of the ritual, *North Devon Journal*, 10 August 1876.
6. Davies, *A People Bewitched*, 77, 89. For other examples of churchyard deposition see Hoggard, ‘The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft’, 174.

7. *Norfolk News*, 26 April 1851.
8. *The Times*, 7 April 1857.
9. *Cambridge Independent Press*, 6 February 1903.
10. Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England* (London, 1865), vol. 2, 210.
11. Owen Davies, 'European Folk Medicine', in Kayne, Stephen B. (ed.), *Traditional Medicine: A Global Perspective* (London, 2009), 25–44; Davies, 'Cunning-Folk in the Medical Market-Place', 63.
12. *Stockport Advertiser*; reprinted in the *Belfast Mercury*, 23 November 1857.
13. *Derbyshire Times*, 17 October 1888.
14. *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20 March 1894.
15. Frederick Thomas Elworthy, *The Evil Eye* (London, 1895), 53–56; Bob Bushaway, "'Tacit, Unsuspected, but Still Implicit Faith": Alternative Belief in Nineteenth-Century Rural England', in Harris, Tim (ed.), *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500–1850* (London, 1995), reprinted in Brian Levack (ed.), *New Perspectives on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology* (London, 2001), vol. 6, 91; *Hartlepool Mail*, 16 November 1882.
16. 'Chipstable, Somerset', *England: The Other Within* (Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, n.d.), at: [england.prm.ox.ac.uk/prmap/mapresults/chipstablesomerset.html](http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/prmap/mapresults/chipstablesomerset.html); *Western Daily Press*, 23 January 1935.
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18. *Western Times*, 27 October 1860.
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21. *North Devon Journal*, 10 August 1876.
22. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, 186–7.
23. *Paisley Herald*, 30 January 1869.
24. *Taunton Courier*, 9 October 1901.
25. See M. Chris Manning, 'Homemade Magic: Concealed Deposits in Architectural Contexts in the Eastern United States', M.A. thesis, Department of Anthropology, Ball State University (Munice, IN, 2012), 305–9; Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, 162.
26. *Western Gazette*, 29 November 1872.
27. On the material evidence for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries see Davies, *Cunning-Folk*, chapter 6; Hoggard, 'The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft', 181–182; Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, chapter 6; Tallis, 'The Conjuror, the Fairy, the Devil and the Preacher', chapter 6.
28. See Davies, *Cunning-Folk*, chapter 5; Owen Davies, *Grimoires: A History of Magic Books* (Oxford, 2009); Frank Klaassen and Chris Phillips, 'The Return of Stolen Goods: Reginald Scot, Religious Controversy, and a Late Sixteenth-Century Manuscript of Magic', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 1 (2006), 135–177; S. F. Davies, 'The Reception of Reginald Scot's Discovery of Witchcraft: Witchcraft, Magic, and Radical Religion', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 74 (2013), 381–401; Lisa Tallis, 'Literacy, Magic and "Superstition" in Nineteenth-Century Wales: The Example of Dic Aberdaron', *Welsh Historical Review*, 26 (2013), 389–422.
29. National Library of Wales MS 6746 C; Tallis, 'The Conjuror, the Fairy, the Devil and the Preacher', 264.
30. *Newcastle Guardian*, 2 June 1855.

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34. Timothy Easton, 'Four Spiritual Middens in Mid Suffolk, England, ca. 1650 to 1850', *Historical Archaeology*, 47 (2013), 23, figure 9.
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36. Timothy Easton, 'Portals of protection', *SPAB magazine* (Winter 2014), 54, figure 5a.
37. Easton, 'Candle Powers', figs a, b, and c middle right.
38. Timothy Easton, 'Twelfth Night and the Lord of Misrule', *Weald and Downland Open Air Museum Magazine* (2005), 26–27.
39. John Henry Brady, *Clavis Calendaria* (London, 1812), vol. 1, 189; quoted in Iona Opie and Moira Tatem, *Oxford Dictionary of Superstitions* (Oxford, 1989), 55.
40. Owen Davies, 'The Nightmare Experience, Sleep Paralysis and Witchcraft Accusations', *Folklore*, 114(2) (2003), 181–203.
41. Easton, 'Candle Powers', 58, figure top right.
42. Timothy Easton, 'Plumbing a Spiritual World', *SPAB Magazine* (Winter 2013), 40–47.
43. John Aubrey, *Miscellanies* (London, [1696] 1721), 147.
44. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, 137–155.
45. Found by the owner of Manor Farm, Nan Rains, with a metal detector. Now in possession of the West Dereham Heritage Group.
46. Easton, 'Candle Powers', 58, illustrated top right.
47. This observation might also account for the range of letters and symbols made on candle marked ceilings.
48. Purchased by Moyses Hall Museum, Bury St Edmunds.
49. Timothy Easton and Jeremy Hodgkinson, 'Apotropaic Symbols on Cast-Iron Firebacks', *Journal of the Antique Metalware Society*, 21 (2013), 23–25.
50. Merrifield, *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, 162, figure 51. Both this knife and the other two plain knives of approximately the same date were in the collection of Mr W. H. Brown in 1987.
51. The nine of diamonds has had the nick name 'The Curse of Scotland' since the first half of the eighteenth century. It is said to be the most unlucky card in the playing pack, but in the eighteenth-century card game of 'Pope Joan' it is also the most powerful.

# 13

## The Wider Picture: Parallel Evidence in America and Australia

*Ian Evans, M. Chris Manning and Owen Davies*

Tracing British magical practices in colonial and post-colonial American and Australian communities provides a valuable means of exploring the migration experience in the past, which in turn helps us to look with a new perspective on the continuation of folk magic in Britain. Which practices continued in settler communities? Which did not? And why? The assumption might be that people took their entire 'toolkit' of apotropaic knowledge and practices, just as they continued to maintain other aspects of their former local, regional and national domestic lives. As Malcolm Gaskill puts it in his recent book, *How the English became Americans*, early migrants determinedly perpetuated their Englishness 'in homes, possessions, dress, communication, law and culture. Even regional English styles and customs were exported to America. Novice settlers were ready to endanger their lives, but not their sense of themselves.'<sup>1</sup> We know that the fear of witches migrated with American colonialists; the seventeenth-century trial records bear ample witness. The newspapers and folklore records further demonstrate how two hundred years later witchcraft was still widely feared and counter-witchcraft measures continued to be practised amongst long established European-American communities, as well as amongst the millions of new immigrants that poured into the country from across Europe.<sup>2</sup>

M. Chris Manning's exhaustive survey of the material evidence for British apotropaic magic from colonial and nineteenth-century America, and C. Riley Augé's recent Ph.D. thesis on the archaeology of domestic magic in colonial New England, have clearly established the migration of ritual practices, and their research has generated useful models for the identification and interpretation of magic in historic archaeological contexts.<sup>3</sup> Both studies also raise the issue of tracing the regionality of Anglo-American folk magic. It is not too difficult to discern some distinctly Scottish magical practices in the American folklore archive, but getting down to the level of English regions is far more challenging. In his bold but deeply problematic book *Albion's Seed*, David Hackett Fischer defined folk magic as one of the twenty-four English 'folkways' that he argued profoundly shaped American

society. These he further identified as arriving in four waves of regional English emigration between 1629 and 1775.<sup>4</sup> One of the valid criticisms made against Fischer's approach is that he presents 'folkways' as static and unchanging. He also ignores the cultural influence of the many English migrants who arrived after the late eighteenth century. As we have seen with regard to English bottle magic in an earlier chapter, magical practices are not unchanging and were ever being adapted and reformulated. With regard to folk magic, a lot more work also needs to be done on the regionality of traditions and practices in England before anything substantive can be said about their continuance in America.

The richness of literary sources for the continuation of witchcraft in modern America is not mirrored in Australia. There were no groups of antipodean antiquarians and folklorists systematically recording popular beliefs amongst settlers and native-born European Australians during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast, anthropologists were fascinated by what they considered the 'primitive' magical beliefs and practices of the aborigines. This apparent absence of evidence for folk belief has led to assumptions that convicts and immigrants shed their magical practices on setting foot in the 'new' continent. Writing of Irish immigrants, Patrick O'Farrell, stated that 'a whole range of pressures operated against the continuance in Australia of... folk beliefs and customs, the mental world of magic and superstition'. It seems inconceivable, though, that the experience of life in Australia should be so fundamentally different to that of America in the same period as to make popular magical practices completely redundant. Writing in 1996, Maureen Perkins asserted that it was not 'a fruitless task to look for examples of popular belief amongst the early settlers and convicts'.<sup>5</sup> Her window on the continuation of popular magic was through examining Australian astrological almanacs. Ian Evans' pioneering work on the material expressions of magic in historic Australian buildings proves Perkins' point, and represents an important resource for understanding early Australian popular culture.<sup>6</sup> This recent work on Australia provides a useful comparison with the material culture from America, though at this early stage in the development of the field we have to be cautious about jumping to conclusions. No witch bottles have yet been found in Australia, for instance, but that does not mean the ritual was not practised there. Inferring from the American evidence, it would seem unlikely that some variation of bottle magic did not continue.

Settlers in America and Australia often had to adapt to very different environments and circumstances. There were new animals, pests and dangers to be kept from the home. More important, in terms of how folk magical practices might have been adapted or influenced, was the interaction with other indigenous cultures and diasporas. It is clear from the literary evidence, and there are traces in the material culture, that Americans of British origin absorbed aspects of the magical cultures of the Native Americans, African

Americans, and, amongst the European diaspora, the Germans in particular. The influences permeated both ways, of course.<sup>7</sup> And in assessing the material finds discussed below we should consider in what instances, and how, British folk magical practices became American or Australian folk magical practices.

## The material evidence for British magic in North America

### M. Chris Manning

Many English colonists in both the Virginia and Massachusetts colonies probably engaged in some form of vernacular folk magic at least occasionally, if not regularly. Occult ritual and folk magic were so prevalent that theologians such as Puritan ministers and father-son duo Increase and Cotton Mather felt the need to repeatedly condemn their use in their writings. Cotton Mather commented on the 'little witchcrafts' practised in colonial New England, observing that, 'in some Towns it has been an usual



*Figure 13.1* Magical items found

thing for People to cure Hurts with Spells, or to use detestable Conjurations, with Sieves, Keys, and Pease, and Nails, and Horse-shoes, and I know not what other Implements, to learn the things for which they have a forbidden, and an impious Curiosity. 'Tis in the Devils Name, that such things are done'.<sup>8</sup> Despite documentary evidence of the continuation of British folk magical practices in the American colonies, material evidence has been largely overlooked.

### **Witch bottles**

One of the most clearly 'magical' artifacts that has been identified in North America is the witch bottle. Witch bottles are also well documented in the historical record, thus they effectively demonstrate the temporal, geographic, and contextual scope of an artifact with known ritual significance. Furthermore, the continuation of the British witch bottle tradition in North America makes a strong case for the possibility that evidence of other forms of British folk magic also continued in the colonies, including those which are largely absent from the historical record.

Relatively few witch bottles have been recovered in the United States, compared to Britain, with only eight possible examples reported to date.<sup>9</sup> Almost all of the specimens have come from the Mid-Atlantic region. It is surprising that only one example has been found in New England, which was settled primarily by colonists from East Anglia, where witch bottles are commonly encountered. Late seventeenth-century writings also indicate that witch bottles were widely known and used in New England during the early colonial period, which makes their relative absence from the material record all the more puzzling.<sup>10</sup>

With one exception, all American witch bottles date to the eighteenth century or later – a period of supposed decline in magical belief.<sup>11</sup> At least two examples date to the nineteenth century. Because numerous examples of witch bottles dating from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been reported in England, however, perhaps it is not surprising that American examples follow a similar temporal pattern. Elsewhere in North America, on the eastern coast of Canada, the witch bottle tradition survived into the late twentieth century. Numerous accounts of the continued use of witch bottles were recorded among people of English descent on the island of Newfoundland, England's oldest colony in North America, where the practice was referred to as 'putting up a bottle'. Additional evidence was reported rather recently from the Canadian province of Ontario, where police officers apprehended a man in possession of a plastic bottle containing urine and razor blades, which he explained was 'for protection from bad people'.<sup>12</sup>

American witch bottles differ from British examples in that those recovered thus far consist of glass bottles or vials, with no stoneware bellarmines having been conclusively identified as witch bottles. At the White Oak Site in Dorchester County, Maryland, the broken neck of a glass wine bottle was

recovered from near the hearth or chimney of a brick structure. Part of the stopper still remained in the bottle and seventeen pins, both straight and bent, pierced both the inside and outside surfaces of the cork.<sup>13</sup> Parallels for this type of configuration, in which pins are inserted into the cork, have been reported in southwestern England. Another interesting example was recovered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where a glass bottle sealed with a cork was found to contain two fabric shoe insoles wrapped inside a roughly triangular or heart-shaped scrap of felt pierced with a total of twelve pins and needles.<sup>14</sup> The bottle has been dated to the first half of the nineteenth century. Pierced fabric hearts are frequently found in witch bottles in Britain, although the presence of the shoe insoles seems to be unique, as the author is unaware of any known parallels from Britain. One artifact likely associated with British folk magic was reported from the Jamestown site in Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in North America, established in 1607, in which a glass bottle filled with white pebbles was found buried within a structure on the perimeter of the fort, immediately adjacent to a chimney foundation and the location of an interior doorway.<sup>15</sup> It has been conjectured that this artifact is a form of witch bottle, although the author is unaware of any parallel examples from Britain.

### **Concealed shoes and garments**

Like witch bottles, the study of concealed footwear further demonstrates that long-established British folk rituals were transferred to the colonies and maintained for generations, albeit in slightly altered forms and with presumably new meanings. To date, more than two hundred and fifty deposits of concealed footwear from two hundred and thirty four unique sites have been reported in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Most deposits of concealed footwear come from domestic structures, although deposits have also been found concealed inside public buildings, including statehouses in both Indiana and Kansas. The majority of deposits consist of a single shoe or boot, but 'families' of shoes are also common. In the case of single, unmatched shoes, approximately 46 per cent represent children. Among the 54 per cent that have been identified as adult-sized, there is a fairly even distribution between men's and women's shoes. Curiously, in the United States there appears to be a 2:1 preferential selection of left-footed shoes over right-footed shoes, a trend that has not been reported in Britain.

Deposits of concealed footwear are most heavily concentrated in New England and the Upper Chesapeake, the heart of British colonial settlement. Examples have also been reported from thirty-three of the fifty states, however, from as far south as Louisiana and as far west as California and Oregon. Even in far-flung locales, there appears to be a tangible connection to British heritage and tradition. For example, at the Workman-Temple House in Industry, California, four unmatched shoes were found under the floor of a second-story bedroom.<sup>17</sup> The house's first owner, William

Workman, was born in 1799 in Westmorland, England. At the time of the concealment (ca. 1890), the house was owned by Workman's grandson, John Harrison Temple, suggesting that the shoe concealment ritual had been passed down through several generations. Another case was reported at U.S. Army Fort Rosecrans near San Diego, California, where a single boot and a campaign hat from the Spanish American War were found inside a specially built masonry cavity in the chimney of an enlisted men's barracks constructed in 1904. According to archaeologist Ronald May, muster rolls for that year report that more than 15 per cent of the soldiers stationed at Fort Rosecrans were born in the British Isles, while another 40 per cent originated from the Eastern seaboard of the United States. He concludes: 'Any one of these men who worked for the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps could have quietly bricked-in the boot and hat during construction of the chimney'.<sup>18</sup>

As in the British Isles and Europe, some shoe deposits are accompanied by other artifacts, varying from a single object to a deposit containing a dozen or more objects. One of the most common artifacts associated with concealed shoes are garments, although they have also been reported in separate concealments without shoes and probably functioned in similar ways. Garment types commonly encountered include hats and other headwear, socks and stockings, gloves and mittens, and corsets and stays.

### **Spiritual middens**

One of the conclusions that can be drawn regarding shoe concealment is that although shoes are very frequently found as single deposits, a significant number are part of a larger deposit. These often consist of garments such as hats, socks, and gloves, but also of other mundane artifacts such as broken glass and ceramics, animal bones, printed and written texts (particularly religious texts), pieces of cloth tied up or bundled, fragments of burnt wood, botanical materials, broken toys or pieces of furniture, and everyday household implements such as spoons, knives, and broken tobacco pipes. These objects are all closely associated with the family and the daily activities of the household. An example of a possible spiritual midden reported in the United States was reported in Amherst, Massachusetts and includes several shoes, a man's legging, an unmatched glove, and a Bible. In another case from Montgomery, New York, five unmatched shoes, two mismatched socks, a woman's single glove, a knife, broken ceramics, pages torn from a Bible, and other miscellaneous artifacts were found inside a plaster wall.

### **Concealed cats**

Concealed cats are not unique to Britain, as they have been reported in significant numbers in both Ireland and Germany.<sup>19</sup> In the United States, there are reports of nearly forty cases of the remains of cats found within

structures, although in many cases it cannot be conclusively determined whether the cats were accidental interments or deliberate placements. Much of this evidence comes in the form of historic newspaper articles that describe finds, with little in the way of details. In such circumstances, it has been this author's practice to assume that such cases are the result of accidental entrapment or natural death. However, in the United States, the evidence is compelling enough in just over a dozen cases to suggest deliberate concealment, with varying degrees of certainty.<sup>20</sup> From this evidence it can be concluded that concealed cats are most commonly found in domestic structures, primarily in subfloor or foundation deposits or in a wall cavity. In several instances, the cats are accompanied by the bodies of mice, rats, or birds, similar to those reported in Britain.

One of the most compelling cases for deliberate concealment was reported from the John Carlyle House in Alexandria, Virginia. The two-and-a-half-story Georgian-style mansion was constructed between 1751 and 1753 by John Carlyle, a prominent Virginia merchant and landowner. Carlyle was born in Dumfriesshire, Scotland in 1720, emigrating to the American colonies as a young man. In addition to spending the first two decades of his life in Scotland, Carlyle traveled back to Scotland and England in 1751, commencing construction of his home in Alexandria soon after his return. During extensive restoration efforts in the 1970s, a mason encountered the preserved body of a cat sealed inside the foundation of the southeast chimney. According to the report of investigations, 'at first it was assumed that the cat had crawled into the flue and died; but upon further investigation, it was evident that the cat had been interred in a masonry cavity. As the body was partially mummified, with the skin and fur intact, it can be assumed that the cavity was airtight'. It is likely that Carlyle was responsible for, or in the very least aware of, the immurement of the cat within the foundation of his new home. Carlyle was described as 'thoroughly and deeply involved with the construction of his house,' and it is believed that he personally oversaw the work of the itinerant craftsmen as well as the indentured and slave laborers who contributed to its construction.<sup>21</sup> Talented masons would have worked on the house, based on the quality of the stonework. It is likely that either one of the craftsmen or Carlyle himself was responsible for the concealment.

### **Horse skulls and bones**

The skulls of horses are frequently found concealed within standing structures in Britain, as well as in Ireland and parts of Scandinavia.<sup>22</sup> It would, therefore, not be unexpected to encounter similar deposits in North America. To date, however, only two such deposits have been confirmed. The first case was reported from South Deerfield, Massachusetts, where a horse skull was discovered inside a wall cavity adjacent to a fireplace in the eighteenth-

century Bryant Homestead. Fortunately for researchers, the person responsible for the concealment, Colonel David Mason Bryant, placed a note with the skull:

Col D. M. Bryant and family took possession of this farm April 29, 1848.  
David Mason Bryant                      Isabella Williams Bryant  
James Sturgis Bryant                    Hannah Mason Bryant  
William Bryant Mary                    Bryant  
David Mason Bryant                      Jr. Fanny Bliss Bryant

It is likely that the Bryant family concealed the skull as a form of consecration ritual marking their occupation of their new home and less as a protective measure associated with folk magic. Colonel Bryant and his wife were both from established Massachusetts families whose ancestors had immigrated to the American colonies from Ireland almost two centuries prior, suggesting that the tradition of placing a horse skull within the structure of a house was familiar to them, perhaps passed down through multiple generations.

A second case of concealed horse skulls was discovered at the ca. 1810 Nicholas Jarrot Mansion in Cahokia, Illinois, where four skulls were recovered from three different locations in the walls of the building, including next to a fireplace and above an interior doorway.<sup>23</sup> The two-story brick house was constructed by French-born entrepreneur Nicholas Jarrot, although the itinerant craftsmen who worked on the construction of the building had mostly Anglo-American surnames.

### Horseshoes and other iron objects

Descriptions of the ritual use of horseshoes are also found throughout the United States. In fact, some of the earliest descriptions of horseshoes in colonial America refer to the objects as apotropaic charms. In Jamestown, Virginia, in 1626, testimony regarding an accusation of witchcraft describes how one woman heated a horseshoe red hot in an oven before flinging it into urine to make the witch 'sick at the harte'.<sup>24</sup> According to Chappell, in the spring of 1671, Edward Cole of Northumberland County, Virginia, accused Hanna Neale of bewitching his family and cattle. Cole later withdrew his accusation, however, after observing that Neale was unaffected by the presence of an iron horseshoe nailed to the door of his house.<sup>25</sup>

Iron in any form was seen as possessing apotropaic qualities, although horseshoes as well as iron blades, edge tools, and other sharp implements such as swords, knives, shears and scissors, hooks, axe heads, hoe blades, fireplace pokes, spikes, and nails, were all used for ritual protection from witches, fairies, ghosts, and other things that go bump in the night. Iron nails were also an integral component in many witch bottles.

In the United States, horseshoes and other iron implements seem to have retained their apotropaic qualities. One notable case comes from the circa 1681 Zerubbabel Endicott House in Danvers, Massachusetts.<sup>26</sup> Zerubbabel was the son of Governor John Endicott, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and a native of England. At the Endicott house, a small iron eel-spear trident and an iron horseshoe were found affixed to structural timbers: the trident was placed on a first-floor girt over a doorway and the horseshoe was nailed to the exterior surface of a corner post adjacent to the front door, horns pointing up. Both objects were hidden from view underneath the house's original weatherboard siding. The context of both artifacts is highly indicative of the apotropaic employment of iron.

Several horseshoes have been recovered from archaeological contexts that suggest their use as an apotropaic device. During excavations at the Chadbourne Site in South Berwick, Maine, an early English colonial homestead dated ca. 1643–1690, two iron horseshoes were recovered near exterior doorways.<sup>27</sup> Both artifacts are interpreted as having been nailed over or near doorways to protect the occupants from witchcraft. A second example of a horseshoe that may have been used in a ritual context comes from the John Howland House in Kingston, Virginia. During excavations of the structure in 1937–1938, a horseshoe was recovered inside the house, a foot from the wall and three feet from the threshold.<sup>28</sup> Because this horseshoe was found near the doorway of an early colonial domestic structure, it is highly likely that the artifact represents another example of the use of British folk magic in colonial America.

### **Poppets**

In Britain, as well as in many other parts of the world, poppets and other anthropomorphic figurines are frequently associated with folk magic and witchcraft. Poppets were typically constructed of clay, wax, wood, or cloth and were pinched, twisted, stroked, burned, pricked with pins, or otherwise tortured in the belief that what was done to the poppet would also be suffered by the intended victim. In Britain, dolls and poppets are occasionally found concealed in buildings.<sup>29</sup> In the United States, poppets and similar figures appear in both historical records and collections of folklore, although only two examples of doll-like figures have been reported from concealed deposits. On Long Island, New York, three crude doll-like figurines were recovered from the walls of the mid-seventeenth century Benjamin Horton House. The figures were constructed of twigs with corncob heads and wrapped in scraps of linen. The second case was reported from Damascus, Virginia, where a set of six doll-like figures constructed of muslin rags stuffed with straw were found hidden within the wall of a house. The figures appear to represent a family, including a pair of 'infants' tied together that are suggestive of twins.<sup>30</sup>

### Apotropaic marks, written charms and amulets

Another class of ritual artifacts found in buildings in the eastern United States includes a variety of magical symbols, letters, and words. Ritual marks were certainly not unknown to early Americans, as evidenced by the inclusion of the hexafoil symbol scratched on a plank wall in William Michael Harnett's late nineteenth-century *trompe-l'œil* piece, *The Artist's Letter Rack*. Most recently, a series of hexafoil marks were reported from the circa 1699 Isaac Winslow House in Marshfield, Massachusetts.<sup>31</sup> The images were found scratched into the wood of the fireplace lintel in the winter kitchen. The house was built by Judge Isaac Winslow, whose grandfather, Edward Winslow, left his home in Worcestershire, England for the new Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts, arriving on the legendary Mayflower in 1620. Hexafoil symbols have also been reported on the exterior surfaces of doors of the Abraham Fuller House in West Barnstable, Massachusetts; scratched over the lime whitewash on the interior plank walls of a grist mill near Staunton, Virginia; and inscribed on the interior of a log house in Henry County, Georgia. Other possible examples have been reported from early eighteenth-century Drayton Hall near Charleston, South Carolina and in the Dritt Mansion in York County, Pennsylvania.<sup>32</sup> Research on possible ritual marks in the United States is only in the preliminary stages; however, given the prevalence of such marks in Britain, it is highly likely that additional examples will be found with careful and systematic examination of historic structures.

Historical accounts confirm that written and spoken charms and amulets were in use in colonial America. Clergyman Samuel Williard lamented that the Devil had 'taught men to use the name of God, or of Christ, or of some notable Sentence that is recorded in God's Word, (which is also his name) either for the keeping of Devils out of places, or for the Curing of these or those Maladies that men labour of'.<sup>33</sup> Several examples of written charms and amulets have been reported in concealed contexts in the United States, including examples in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.<sup>34</sup> The types of written charms and amulets reported in the United States include sator squares, the abracadabra charm, and number squares.<sup>35</sup> Patrick Donmoyer has reported several written charms found in barns in Pennsylvania that he identifies as having been produced by a single magical professional.<sup>36</sup> To date, however, all such cases have been discovered in contexts associated with members of the German diaspora, particularly outbuildings. Although there have been no reported examples of similar charms and amulets from contexts associated with the British diaspora in the United States, that is not to say that they do not exist. It is hoped that increased awareness of such charms will encourage archaeologists and architectural historians to actively look for additional examples in early houses and other buildings in the eastern United States.

## Spoons

One type of artifact found in concealed contexts that has received almost no scholarly study, is the spoon. The author is unaware of any studies in Britain that have specifically examined spoons as material evidence of folk magic, although they have been reported in association with known ritual deposits. For example, at Skerne in Yorkshire, England, a ritual deposit discovered beneath a bridge abutment at the River Hull included the remains of cattle, horses, and dogs, as well as an adze, a spoon, and a sword dating to the ninth or tenth century. A deposit from Shropshire, England, contained a single shoe, a broken knife, a spoon, part of a purse, and some chicken bones. Merrifield suggests the possibility of the ritual concealment of silver spoons, noting examples from Suffolk and Gloucestershire, both accompanied by shoes.<sup>37</sup>

In the United States, several cases of spoons concealed within structures have been reported. St. George described a latten spoon dating to the early to mid-seventeenth century that was embedded in the chimney foundation of the John Farrington House in Dedham, Massachusetts. It has been suggested that Farrington, a farmer from Lincolnshire who journeyed to the American colonies and settled in Dedham in the 1630s, placed the spoon in the foundation in the belief 'that the presence of metal object in his foundation would give added strength to his house'.<sup>38</sup> At the Gomez Mill House in Newburgh, New York, a child's shoe found behind a wall was accompanied by a spoon and a shoe last. Back at the Carlyle House in Alexandria, Virginia, a stirrup and a silver spoon were concealed above an interior doorway, while a second spoon was found above a fireplace.<sup>39</sup>

Spoons, like shoes and garments, may have been selected for concealment because of the personal nature of their use. Alternatively, it may be their association with metal, specifically silver, a known apotropaic substance, that makes them appropriate for ritual concealments. Clearly this is an avenue of research that deserves further examination.

## Conclusion

Material evidence of folk magic and ritual is profuse in eastern North America, including in areas that were once part of the British colonial empire. Artifacts such as witch bottles, concealed shoes and garments, concealed cats, horse skulls, horseshoes and objects of iron, poppets, ritual marks, written charms and amulets, all with analogous examples in Britain, illustrate the wide variety of material objects and symbols that were employed in folk ritual contexts. In some cases, only a handful of examples of a particular artifact type have been reported; however, as awareness increases, both in the U.S. and in Britain, researchers will be better equipped to identify and interpret such evidence in an ongoing attempt to make sense of the past and the people who inhabited it.

## **The absence of the document: discovering concealed magic in the antipodes**

**Ian Evans**

Research into the material culture of folk magic in Australia has shown that researchers who lean too heavily on the documentary record may fail to identify and record significant themes and events in social history. Evidence supporting this statement has emerged as a result of six years of artifact-based research focused on locating and recording deliberately concealed objects in old houses and other buildings throughout Australia. The result has been the discovery of rituals, widespread throughout Australia for some one hundred and fifty years and previously undocumented there, which involved the concealment of a variety of objects within voids in houses and other buildings. More than a hundred separate deposits of concealed objects have been identified, recorded and photographed in Australia. There is no apparent concentration in any locality, other than that which appears to be generated by greater population density in cities such as Sydney and Melbourne.

Certain identifying characteristics, noted in British finds, also occur in the Australian concealments, firmly linking them to ritual traditions recorded by English researchers.<sup>40</sup> For example, both British and Australian concealments are typically found at entrance points to buildings – locations which may have been thought to permit easy access by evil spiritual beings. Of these, the most important are the fireplace, chimney flue, and hearth. Other spaces on the periphery of human occupation, including doors, windows, roof cavities, and subfloor areas, have also yielded concealments.<sup>41</sup>

In Australia, British emigrants scattered throughout the colonies of New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, planting the ritual wherever they settled. The shoes and other objects they placed in voids in their houses and other buildings are still being found today. Lifting a decayed floor, taking down an unwanted chimney, or replacing roofing often brings these artifacts into the light of day for the first time in a century or more. Additionally, Australian concealments adhere to the contextual rules for the placement of objects observed in British deposits. Close examination of numerous concealment sites in Australia has indicated that many of the objects placed there had been concealed by or with the knowledge of building tradesmen. Closing the voids where these artifacts are found was the task of carpenters, bricklayers, stonemasons, plasterers, and roof slaters. But if this ritual began as a secret tradition of the building trades it had long since escaped into the community at large.<sup>42</sup>

One of the several enigmas surrounding this practice is that it was widely known but also highly secret. The lack of a paper trail resulted in

historians failing to notice a significant phenomenon in Australian social history. It was not until the discovery of a few shoes in unusual locations in Australian buildings that comparisons were made with similar finds in Great Britain. Once the pursuit was underway it proved remarkably easy to find concealed shoes, garments, cats, and other artifacts in buildings throughout Australia.

Of the ninety-five shoe sites examined in the course of this research, the shoes of children or young people were the most common. The figures are as follows:

Adult male	24
Adult female	10
Children	39
Uncertain	5
Groups	17

Those finds recorded as groups included both pairs and the footwear of more than one person. These included finds which appeared to consist of the footwear of every person in the household at a certain point in time. The largest group find came from the Tasmanian Midlands where thirty-eight shoes and boots were found in a nineteenth-century house.

Other sites examined contained a variety of objects. Of these the majority contained cats with garments not far behind. The details are as follows:

Cats	17
Garments	12
Religious artifacts (marble bible, bible, rosaries)	5
Animal bones	3
Toys	3
Miscellaneous <sup>43</sup>	12
TOTAL	52

### **A world filled with mystery**

Since these are rituals without a written record, conclusions can be drawn only from interpretation of the artifacts. Mute though they are, much can be taken from their condition, age, type and the context in which they are found, and so a discussion of the Australian material may extend that embodied earlier in this book. All of the concealed objects found in Australia were worn, many of them to the very edge of destruction. As in Britain, shoes in particular exhibit wear patterns that are not seen today. This speaks of a period in which poverty was widespread and prosperity was uncommon. It also suggests that wear and tear produced qualities that were useful in terms of the purpose behind the concealment. The efficacy of the concealed object

may have been a function of its association with a particular person in the household. Thus, new and unworn shoes (not so far found in Australian concealments) were too expensive to be wasted in a building void and, more importantly, would not work on the evil beings that they were intended to fool. New shoes had no association with a person.

Several other characteristics of Australian concealed shoes provide scope for speculative interpretation. A significantly large number of them are the footwear of children or young people. Is this a function of a period when larger families were the rule, or was there a preference for the shoes of children because this resulted in harnessing the power of the good and the innocent to combat evil?

Why do so many concealments consist of a single shoe? Where did its mate go? June Swann reported a village conversation in England in which she was told that 'one goes to fire, one goes to water.'<sup>44</sup> Thus, the chimney/fireplace and perhaps the household well received the separated shoes of an old and worn pair. Another possibility is that the missing shoe might have formed the other half of a contract.<sup>45</sup> This theory has been related to the Roman custom of *tessera hospitalis*, in which halves of an object were kept by two friends, family members or the parties to an agreement or a commitment as a token of their bond. Applying this theory to the concealment of shoes raises an intriguing question: if the persons who made the concealment believed that they were thus entering into a contractual arrangement, with whom did they understand the pact was made? How was the other shoe dealt with? This theory implies an arrangement with supernatural and perhaps demonic forces, thus transforming what appears to be mere folk magic into something of a much darker hue.

### Deaths in the family

What drove people to practise magic in nineteenth-century Australia? The answer to the question may lie with the toll of child mortality that was part of life in that period. Cemeteries used in that century are dotted with the graves of infants and young children, many of them victims of illnesses that are no longer a threat to life. Research into the background of families in houses where concealments were made has suggested that there was a tendency to turn to magic when religion was seen to fail to provide protection. Magic placed power in the hands of ordinary people.

A possible example of the way in which misfortune could prompt a religious person to turn to magic is provided by the story of the children of George and Elizabeth Hurley who lived at No. 37 Lower Fort Street in the Sydney waterfront suburb of Dawes Point between 1863 and the 1870s. He is perhaps the George Hurley, born at Alveston in Warwickshire, England, in 1823, who married a Mary Ann (surname unknown) at Leaming or Leamington, Warwickshire, in 1848. They appear to have arrived in Sydney

ca. 1850.<sup>46</sup> George established himself in the commercial life of Sydney and at various times conducted a wholesale drapery store, a fancy goods shop, and acted as an auctioneer and estate agent.<sup>47</sup> He was for some years an alderman of Sydney City Council.<sup>48</sup> He was clearly a civic-minded citizen and as such was a member of the laity that supported the Catholic Church in Sydney. He was one of a number of prominent businessmen on a committee formed under Church auspices to raise money for the completion of St Mary's Cathedral.<sup>49</sup> When they moved into the house in Lower Fort Street, Hurley's wife had previously given birth to six children, of whom three had died in infancy.<sup>50</sup> This was not an unusual story of family life in the nineteenth century. The risk of death, especially of children, was ever-present. This is not to diminish the pain and grief of this family by saying that their loss was ordinary or commonplace, but to point out that they moved to Lower Fort Street against a background of concern for the survival of their children. The fear of further infant deaths must have been very much on their minds. A cough, a chill, a runny nose, a thorn, an infected wound or any one of a number of common conditions that barely cause a ripple today could mark the commencement of a decline that might take a child from this world.

The house, poised at the top of a rocky prominence overlooking the harbour and with water views to the east and the west, was much more exposed to the elements and the sky than their previous residence in the busy commercial hub of 1850s Sydney. Concealing personal objects in a building void at the top of the house to decoy evil away from their children, at a time when this was widely believed to be an effective prophylactic against harm, may have given the Hurleys an increased sense of security and comfort, knowing that they had done all they could to provide for the safety of their family.

The objects found in the roof cavity of the Hurley house during the course of building renovations in 2003 consisted of an ankle boot for a small child dating from ca. 1830 to 1840, and half of a woman's lace collar in a style popular from 1850 to 1865. The boot is well made and is of woolen fabric with a toecap of black leather or kid. Three loops, trimmed with a fabric that may once have been green, have holes through which faceted buttons of black Bohemian glass provided fastening over the small foot inside. Like other concealed shoes found in Australia and elsewhere, this artifact is well worn and appears have been used by more than one child. Concealment is the ultimate end use for an old shoe, which in the process of repeated family connections, may have been considered as having accumulated considerable spiritual power.<sup>51</sup>

### **Cat magic**

The first Australian cat concealment reported to me was found at Her Majesty's Theatre, Ballarat, Victoria, during renovations in the 1990s. The Theatre

was built in 1875 and remodeled in 1898. The most recent concealments of cats so far known took place in two adjacent terrace houses in Miller's Point, Sydney, about 1904, or more than 450 years after cat concealments had been recorded in Germany.<sup>52</sup> The earliest Australian finds that are dateable come from the Primitive Methodist Church of 1863 at Woodchester, South Australia, and from the 1866 Anglican rectory at Birregurra, Victoria.

Concealed cats in both Australia and in the British Isles may be 'posed' so that they appear about to spring, as in the case of the cat found by Rob Thomas underneath the family home at 55 Upton Street, Launceston, Tasmania, some years ago. The animal was described as 'lying on its side, frozen in a very aggressive, quite ferocious pose. It had its mouth open with one paw up. It was as if it was about to kill something and had been frozen in time.'<sup>53</sup> Concealed cats are found in much the same locations as shoes. To date, however, while there are no records of cat concealments within the structure of a chimney, many have been found in close proximity to chimneys, either in the roof cavity or under the ground floor. Beneath a suspended hearth slab is a favoured spot, but cats are also found under front or rear doors where they may have been posted as guardians of the entrances to a house.

Because there is no contemporary documentary explanation of the rules relating to concealments, researchers can only speculate on the reason for the choice of cats over shoes when concealments were being planned. While it is possible that both were intended to serve much the same purpose, cats may have been used in situations where more personal objects were not available. Tradesmen working on buildings where they were not aware of the identity of the future occupants, in rural areas where the owners were not on site, or in cases where they felt the owners would not be willing to provide shoes or other items for concealment, may have fallen back on the use of a cat.

The cat found at Glengallan Homestead, near Warwick in Queensland, may be a case in point. In this example, tradesmen were working at a location that was then quite remote with an employer who was a wealthy landowner with a family that was not accessible to the builders for social and geographical reasons. By concealing a cat under the floor of the drawing room at Glengallan the obligation of the workmen to provide protection would have been fulfilled without the knowledge or cooperation of the future occupants of the house.<sup>54</sup>

Unlike shoes, concealed cats can provide very little information to assist the researcher. Shoes can be dated but cats, as enigmatic in death as in life, tell us very little. There is, it appears, no way to date cat concealments other than by reference to the date of construction of the house or building in which they are found. This provides the earliest possible date for concealment but nothing more. There may be information contained within the structure of a building that suggests concealment at some time after the

construction period. It is usually easy to tell if floorboards have been taken up. A find close to a flooring patch may be indicative of a concealment taking place sometime after construction. But there is no way of accurately dating this or other forms of surface disturbance to walls, floors or brickwork. None of the known Australian cat concealments appears to have occurred while the animal was alive; indications are that the opposite was the case. Cat corpses found to date seem to have been carefully positioned and some may have been posed in an apparently watchful state. But more research is required on concealed cats in order to answer two key questions. First, how were they killed? X-ray examination of the bodies of concealed cats in Austria has revealed broken necks.<sup>55</sup> The same practice may have been in use in Australia but this has yet to be established. Drowning is another possibility. Secondly, were chemicals used to preserve the body? There is no information available on this. On balance, it appears that preservation was not part of the process.

In the case of the cats concealed in adjoining houses in Argyle Place, in Sydney's Miller's Point, there is a glimpse of the possible reasoning behind the choice of these animals. Of the row of six shop-fronted terraced houses on the site, two are known to have contained concealed cats. While the date of initial construction is not known, the group of houses received a make-over around 1906, emerging with a distinct Arts and Crafts appearance in a 1907 photograph. The site of these finds is 500 metres from the place where Sydney's plague epidemic of 1900 was first detected. The unfortunate victim was a 35-year-old van driver named Arthur Payne whose house at 10 Ferry Lane, Miller's Point, was swiftly guarded by police. Payne, his wife and three children, a servant, and a visitor were shunted off to the Quarantine Station at North Head.<sup>56</sup> The plague triggered a major Government response and resulted in the compulsory acquisition of properties and numerous demolitions within the worst-affected zone.

It was known at the time that rats and mice were carriers of the bubonic plague. Fleas that live on these animals act as vectors and transfer the infection from the rodents to humans. Teams of rat-catchers fanned out over the city, concentrating their activities on the slum areas where rats were most numerous. More than 44,000 rats were dispatched by the time the program was concluded. The human toll was also significant. Between 19 January and 9 August 1900, 303 people contracted the disease. Of these, 103 died. With a one-in-three chance of dying if you contracted the disease, it would be understandable if the plague sparked deep-seated fear of domestic rat infestations. Cases of the plague occurred in Sydney and other maritime cities around Australia for many years afterwards.<sup>57</sup>

The Miller's Point cat concealments took place at a time when fear of the plague was still very strong in Sydney. The proximity of the Argyle Place houses where the cats were concealed to the plague's ground zero is noted. Particular care was taken with the cat placed under the floor at No.

10 Argyle Place. It was in a purpose-built box made by fixing floorboards to the bottom of the floor joists. The kitchen floorboards acted as a lid to the box. Of the other dwellings in the group, one was extensively renovated by speculators who cannot now be contacted and the remaining buildings have not been examined for subfloor or other concealments.

The outbreak of plague within close proximity to these houses, both geographically and temporally, raises the possibility that there was a purpose behind the concealment of cats in renovated buildings so close to the site of the original infection. The connection of rats to evil spirits has long been known. Beliefs about rats as harbingers of evil and omens of death were recorded in Worcestershire in 1909, thus there was good reason to see them in this light in Sydney in the first years of the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> The discovery of one cat close to the site of the Sydney plague outbreak might be overlooked as mere coincidence but the second cat, placed on a specially constructed platform in an adjoining house, carries the story further. This was a concealment with intent, made at a time when fear of the disease continued to grip the residents of Sydney. These concealments took place in a period when ancient beliefs may have overlapped with new scientific understanding. Both 'superstition' and science placed the blame for the plague squarely on the rats that infested the slums of Sydney. It is possible that the cats were chosen and concealed for their supposed ability to function in the underworld and, perhaps, to deal with the diabolical forces that may have been considered to be instrumental in the spread of the plague. Lingering fears of supernatural threat may have influenced the precautions taken by either the builders or the occupants of the houses in question.<sup>59</sup>

### **Clothed with magic**

Twelve examples of concealed garments have been found in Australia. These consisted of a variety of artifacts ranging from half a woman's lace collar in an 1830's house in Dawes Point, New South Wales, and a straw hat in an early nineteenth-century house at Antill Ponds in the Midlands of Tasmania, to convict shirts from Sydney and Granton, Tasmania, two pairs of trousers in a lighthouse at Geraldton, Western Australia, and a sailor's cap found within the walls of a community hall at Goulburn, New South Wales.<sup>60</sup> Other finds included a convict jacket from the old Port Arthur Commissariat at Taranna, Tasmania, and a waistcoat of ca. 1830 discovered in the roof cavity of the former Good Woman Inn, Hobart. Gloves were found beneath the floor of a house at Lindisfarne, Tasmania, and St Mary's Cathedral, Perth.<sup>61</sup>

Caches containing the clothing of children have been found in Australia. These include one of the pairs of trousers in the lighthouse at Geraldton, Western Australia (referred to previously) and a young boy's coat from Cessnock, New South Wales.<sup>62</sup> As with shoes, concealed garments found to

date are in very poor condition: worn, dirty, ragged and, as in the case of the waistcoat from the Good Woman Inn, lacking part of their substance. The waistcoat has had the black silk from its front cut away. While this may have been a matter of not wishing to waste black silk, or perhaps a contractual matter, only half of the silk on this garment was preserved. Taking all of it may have rendered the charm ineffective.

There are correspondences between the places in buildings where concealed shoes and concealed garments are found. The exception, very probably for entirely logical reasons, is that concealed garments are not found in chimney flues. It is notable that confirmed convict garments in public collections survived because they were concealed in the buildings where they were found. Significant finds of concealed convict garments include the shirts from Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney, and from the supervisor's cottage at Granton, Tasmania, and the waistcoat from the Port Arthur Commissariat. Suspected or possible concealed convict shoes have come from the Moreton Bay Commissariat, Brisbane, and the cottage at Granton. Commissariats were located at convict stations and were used for the storage and distribution of everything needed to conduct a penal settlement.

### **Conclusion**

This research has revealed the existence in Australia of a hitherto unknown set of rituals that originated in Britain at least seven centuries ago. Its purpose was to protect the occupants of houses from evil spiritual forces. The same ritual was also employed to provide protection for the occupants of a variety of other buildings and structures, both private and public, in the period from the commencement of European settlement in Australia until the 1930s.

The objects concealed in voids include – as in Britain and America – shoes, garments, cats and a variety of domestic artifacts and utensils. Objects concealed as part of this ritual are now being extracted from the dark and silent voids in which they have spent a great many years and are beginning to cast new light on the hopes and fears of Australians in the period 1788 to ca. 1935. Intensive research concentrated on the occupants of a number of houses in this study has produced evidence of infant and child mortality associated with the concealment of objects. A protective intent is therefore suggested. In addition to providing a unique record of the footwear of Australians in the period before circa 1935, the ritual described here has significant ramifications for social history. Garments and footwear contained in caches discovered throughout Australia reveal both the poverty in which many people lived but also the dread that was part of everyday life before modern medicine. In addition, the preservation of the small number of convict garments that survived from Australia's

period as a destination for British criminals can now be attributed to ritual apotropaic activities.

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