The archaeology of counter-witchcraft and popular magic

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One aspect of the study of witchcraft and magic, which has not yet been absorbed into the main stream of literature on the subject, is the archaeological record of the subject. Objects such as witch-bottles, dried cats, horse skulls, shoes, written charms and numerous other items have been discovered concealed inside houses in significant quantities from the early modern period until well into the twentieth century. The locations of these objects within houses, and primary literary sources relating to witch-bottles in particular, indicate that at least some of these artefacts were concealed to ward off witches and other perceived 'evil' influences such as ghosts and demons. The following discussion presents the results of a survey of United Kingdom museums and archaeological establishments, and introduces the current facts and theories about these artefacts.

The material record makes up a substantial body of evidence and provides unwitting testimony to the beliefs and practices of the past, many of which were never recorded at the time. When studying periods when levels of literacy were poor, physical artefacts represent one of the few direct links with the actions and beliefs of the silent majority. In the case of dried cats, horse skulls and other practices it seems that the physical record is the only record we have that these practices went on. By studying these objects we can learn about their distribution and frequency, and also some idea of the level of effort, and by association maybe the depth of belief, involved in the act of depositing these ritual objects. Their analysis also provides additional clues and signs of practices which have never been recorded on paper before, giving us tangible, physical evidence in ways which the written archive does not. Viewed in conjunction with the written archive, this physical resource could contribute greatly to what is known about witchcraft, fear of witchcraft and counter-witchcraft. With the notable exception of Ralph Merrifield's 1987 book, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, work on this subject has been largely confined to small journals, magazines and newspaper articles.¹ Excepting Merrifield's book, these papers tend to focus either on individual finds

or they have a broad focus and contain little supporting evidence. The purpose of the project currently being undertaken by the author is to remedy this, and to look closely at the meaning and significance of the related practices. A full survey of this type has never been undertaken until now.

The artefacts concerned provide physical evidence of the continuation and survival of counter-witchcraft practices before, during and after the witch trials. This evidence suggests that popular beliefs and practices concerning the fear of witchcraft and other malign forces changed little after the period of the witch trials, except in minor details, and continued through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and well into the twentieth. These objects constitute a large and important body of evidence attesting very positively to the widespread use of and continuation of these practices. At least in terms of the material evidence, it seems that the decline of magic was a slow and long-drawn-out affair.

Dating and estimating

There are many problems associated with studying these artefacts. The literature on the subject is sparse and variable in quality, and within archaeology these objects often do not find their way into final reports. There are other problems affecting the task of assessing the distribution and extent of these practices. The first and most obvious problem is that many buildings which formerly existed have been demolished, altered, renovated and stripped, so that any objects recorded or reported can only represent a portion of those which must have existed. Another problem is the simple fact that these objects were concealed in buildings, making their discovery a chance affair in most cases. Further compounding this, most of these objects go completely unrecorded or reported and find their way ultimately into builder's skips, garden bonfires and collectors' homes. Many individuals own or know of these objects and, if asked, will supply relevant details, but often this is so long after the original discovery that the details are frequently vague or incorrect. Hence the recorded figures represent only a tiny portion of the true number of objects that must have existed. Although the figures in this paper are the most thorough and comprehensive to date, they still only account for those rare objects that found their way into museum collections, archaeological reports and the files of local researchers.

Another difficulty with interpreting these objects lies in establishing when they were concealed. It is not always easy to tell when a dried cat has been inserted into a building for example, and horse skulls present similar difficulties. The date of manufacture can often be ascertained for glass or stoneware witch-bottles, but this does not always mean they were concealed around the same time. Written charms can be dated broadly by writing style and context but they rarely have a date written on them. The objects which

offer the most precise dates are concealed shoes. The staff of the Boot and Shoe Department at Northampton Central Museum and Art Gallery can provide quite narrow date ranges for shoes that they have been allowed to examine.

In cases where precise methods of arriving at a date are not available, the date of the building in which they were found must be taken into account, along with any known changes to the building. Arriving at a date for objects concealed in buildings can be difficult, therefore, and often depends on inspecting the building, which is not always practical. Using the building to date the objects often only provides a broad date range in which the item may have been concealed, but more precise dates can sometimes be arrived at where the object coincides with recognisable alterations to the structure. Where groups of objects including shoes are discovered adjacent to an obvious alteration, it is sometimes possible to arrive at a very clear date for the objects, but rarely to a precise year.

The survey

The survey for this project was carried out by post and a total of 661 museums, archaeological units and individuals were consulted from throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Owing to financial constraints the survey did not include every museum in each county and it is likely that some finds have been missed as a result. Only the figures for England have been calculated and, out of a total of 508 English establishments and individuals contacted, 328 (65 per cent) responded and of these 237 (47 per cent) reported objects of interest to the survey.² It is highly likely that many of those who did not respond do in fact hold objects of relevance and also that those who responded with information did not in every case supply all of the information.³ Before describing the objects in detail it is important to stress that, with the exception of witch-bottles, there is very little primary documentary evidence to support or explain why they were concealed in buildings. This is the main reason why the significance of these objects has not been addressed within the field of history. Attempts to explain why these objects were concealed must rest on detailed examination of the object and its context within the building, and comparison with other objects found in similar circumstances.

For the purposes of this paper, the numbers for the finds will be separated in to pre- and post-1700. Of the 749 deposits discovered within buildings in England and reported to me 231 (31 per cent) are pre-1700, 159 (21 per cent) are post-1700, and 359 (48 per cent) could not be accurately dated.⁴ The latter figure for imprecise dating reflects several factors, namely the general lack of good records relating to individual objects, the small amount of detailed research which has been undertaken on the objects, and the broad

difficulties involved in establishing a date for the objects. Clearly more detailed research into individual finds is needed if this material record is to illuminate folk beliefs in a sophisticated way.⁵

Witch-bottles

From the middle of the sixteenth to the twentieth century many people concealed stoneware and glass urine-filled bottles beneath their hearths, thresholds and sometimes in walls. The placing of these bottles evidently required significant effort, and the contents found inside the bottles suggests that some kind of recipe or formula of symbolic value was being adhered to. It appears that this practice, like the others discussed in this paper, was an act of house protection used to prevent a variety of bad influences from entering the home and causing harm to the occupants.⁶ More specifically, witch-bottles could also constitute a retaliatory act against a particular witch to force her or him into removing a bewitchment.

Until the mid-eighteenth century the most popular form of bottle was a type of German stoneware which became popularly known as 'bellarmines',⁷ but glass bottles were also concealed with similar contents. At present, 187 English examples of these bottles and other vessels have come to light through the survey. Of these, 108 (58 per cent) are pre-1700, twenty-one (11 per cent) are post-1700 and fifty-eight (31 per cent) could not be accurately dated. It is highly likely that the substantial majority of those as yet undated bottles belong to the period post-1700. Witch-bottles are most densely concentrated in the south-east, particularly East Anglia, London and the stretch of the south from Hampshire through to Kent – although at the extreme ends of their distribution they have been recorded in Cornwall, Worcestershire, and as far north as Yorkshire.

The glazed stoneware bottles known as 'bellarmines' 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 on to 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. They 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 mass-producing copies.⁸ The colloquial name for these stoneware bottles, 'bellarmines', seems to have evolved from tales told about Cardinal Bellarmine. It appears that some comparison between the mean face on the bottles and the perceived nature of the Cardinal was the satire here.⁹ By 1700 the popularity of imported stoneware drinking vessels had

waned and glass was becoming more commonplace. This is mirrored by the increased finds of glass witch-bottles during the eighteenth century, and it is glass, with only rare exceptions, which is found in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Ralph Merrifield's 1954 article on 'The Use of Bellarmine's as Witch-Bottles', in which he combined archaeology and documentary evidence to examine their nature and purpose, was the first serious investigation of the subject.¹⁰ Although the literary sources used by Merrifield related primarily to the early modern period, their detailed description of the contents and purpose of the bottles show clear similarities with the evidence of bottles from later centuries. The most insightful accounts derive from the late seventeenth century. In his *Late Memorable Providences*, published in 1691, Cotton Mather described how witch-bottles contained, 'Nails, Pins, and such Instruments ... as carry a shew of Torture with them'.¹¹ That defender of the reality of witchcraft, Joseph Glanvill, related a tale of witchcraft involving witch-bottles. He tells of a woman whose health had been languishing and how a travelling cunning-man diagnosed 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.¹²

Joseph Blagrove, in his *Astrological Practice of Physick*, described how one way to counter witchcraft was to

stop the urine of the Patient, close [it] 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.

The reason for its success was, he thought, '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 poisonous matter into the body of man or beast, without some of the Witches blood mingled with it'.¹³ 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 the witch's groin, forcing him or her to remove their spell from the victim.

The following instructions for making a witch-bottle were given to a pregnant woman in 1701 by a cunning-man of St Merryn, Cornwall:

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 clay 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.¹⁴

Other later examples of the use of witch-bottles can also be found in the historical as well as archaeological record. 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.¹⁵ Another example of the boiling of a witch-bottle proved fatal in 1804 when a cunning-man, John Hepworth of Bradford, experimented with boiling an iron witch-bottle which exploded, killing his client.¹⁶

These examples demonstrate that there were two principal methods of employing witch-bottles. One consisted of heating the concoction over a fire, and the other of burying it. Bearing this in mind it is likely that this particular practice must have been significantly more widespread than can presently be estimated from the number of finds for the bottles may have been discarded after their apparently successful use on the fire.

Less than half of all the bottles were found with any contents.¹⁷ Of those that did by far the most common component (in 90 per cent of cases) was some form of iron in every stage from rust stains through to well preserved pins and nails. Other types of metal were represented in around 20 per cent of the bottles. Second to iron in its various forms is human hair that appears in 22 per cent of the bottles. Other sharp objects such as tree bark, fragments of wood, nail pairings, blades of grass and thorns were found in 10 per cent of the bottles, as were small animal bones. In 10 per cent of bottles small heart-shaped pieces of fabric were discovered, and in a further two bottles the remains of possible effigies have been found. In most examples where tests for the former presence of urine have been carried out, it has proved positive. It must be pointed out that each of these bottles were found in varying degrees of preservation. Only very few were found intact with all their contents and in these cases the excavators often report a loud pop, hiss or sometimes a noxious explosion on opening the bottles. The contents of the bottles change over time and in different circumstances certain ingredients will decay before others. Detailed analytical work is being undertaken

by Dr Alan Massey of Loughborough University to trace the original ingredients of some of the bottles.¹⁸

The evidence provided by the contents endorses the descriptions of witch-bottles in the documents, but clearly the practice developed to include other items too. Urine and pins or nails appear to be the primary ingredients in the bottle, although other sharp or pointed objects also seem to have served the purpose. The reports of small animal bones have not commented on whether the bones had sharp points or not but there may have been other reasons for including them. In the few cases of heart-shaped pieces of fabric it appears that even greater damage was aimed at the witch by harming the heart. It is very likely that the choice of bellarmine bottles (before glass became more popular for this practice) also contributed to the spell with its anthropomorphic appearance probably contributing to the idea that here the witch was being revenged upon. The location of witch-bottles within the building is also significant. Of those which had their location recorded, 50 per cent were found beneath or within the hearth and this was by far the most common location for the bottles overall. Eleven per cent of the bottles were found under the floor, 10 per cent were found beneath the threshold, 8 per cent were found 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 to have been a focal point for many of the artefacts that can be discovered concealed in buildings. The hearth 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 the hearth in his *Traditional Buildings of Britain*: '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.'¹⁹ The hearth was a point of vulnerability for those who believed that dangerous creatures, including witches, were abroad at night and as such needed to be protected. Exactly why this would cause people to bury the bottle there when its success seemed to depend on the sympathetic link between witch and victim rather than location is not clear. It has been suggested that burial in this location would add to the heat inside the bottle causing more discomfort for the witch, but in many cases the bottles are found over half a metre down where it is unlikely that the heat had any great effect. It, therefore, seems possible 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 discussed in this paper. It seems, however, that through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries practices began to vary and

unusual examples of witch-bottles began to appear in addition to the more traditional ones.

In the grave of a young adult at All Saints Church, Loughton, Buckinghamshire, a late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century 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 contained liquid that may be urine, although no analysis has yet been attempted on this substance. The author of the report into the bottle noted that witch-bottles are unusual in this context.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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. The contents of the bottle adhere to the formula of pins and urine and presumably the bottle placed in the coffin as a kind of counter-witchcraft revenge when the individual died.

A late example of a stoneware witch-bottle dated to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century was discovered under the hearth of Clapper Farm in Staplehurst, Kent. When the bottle was found it contained nails and pieces of wood.²² This example demonstrates the custom of burying the bottle by the hearth and also shows the addition of materials not described in the early modern references to 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. 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.²³ In this instance the group of objects were dated to the mid-nineteenth century.²⁴ The phials contained wheat husks and possibly some resin from a pine tree – tests for urine have not been concluded yet.²⁵ Again, the use of small glass phials in this case appears to be some kind of reinterpretation of the original idea of witch-bottles. A much more recent example was discovered at St Augustine's Church, Wembley Park, where a bottle containing a liquid, possibly just water, and a small pottery figurine was found. The figurine resembled the modern stereotype of the witch and it is possible that this 1906 deposit under a concrete floor was a modern reinterpretation of the witch-bottle.²⁶

In terms of the archaeological record the practice of creating and concealing witch-bottles has continued from at least the mid-sixteenth century until well into the twentieth century, albeit in a slightly altered form. The effort involved in creating and concealing witch-bottles could be considerable at times, demonstrating a level of belief that must have been very strong indeed. The numbers of witch-bottles recorded to-date are only a very small

sample of those which must have been concealed originally. Many bottles have not been reported or recorded and it is likely that many more remain to be discovered. These bottles provide hard physical evidence in support of belief in witchcraft and are an indicator of the strength of belief well beyond the period of the witch-trials. The archaeological record in the case of witch-bottles could contribute significantly to the historical debate on witchcraft.

Dried cats

Based on the information received through the survey, dried cats and sometimes the meagre remains of cats are commonly discovered in buildings of all types throughout England, Wales and parts of southern Scotland. They are usually found concealed in walls, but also under floors and in roofs. Since Margaret Howard's 1951 article, 'Dried Cats', there have been very few attempts to address the issue of why so many dried cats are discovered in buildings.²⁷ Theories about their presence vary. Many individuals, when asked, ridicule the suggestion that the animals were 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 that have clearly been sealed into places or fixed in 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.

Margaret Howard outlined the two main theories as to why cats were concealed in buildings. She explored both the foundation sacrifice idea and also the possible practical function of scaring vermin. Her conclusion 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.'²⁸ The notion that dead cats were used in past times to scare vermin does not seem very likely. Rats in particular are probably more likely to eat a dead cat than run away from it no matter how fierce it looks. It is possible, though, that people believed that a dead cat concealed in a building might continue its vermin catching role on a more spiritual plane of existence. Likewise it may be that people immured cats believing that their spirits could ward off other evil spirits.

Howard thought the foundation sacrifice hypothesis as the less probable of the two explanations. The evidence put forward is that of the ancient tradition of foundation sacrifices to appease the land and local gods.²⁹ Several

people have also suggested during the course of the survey 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. This practice is extremely ancient and it is possible that there is some link between the practice of concealing cats in buildings and such foundation sacrifices. John Sheehan's in-depth study of a dried cat found at Ennis Friary in Co. Clare came to the conclusion that it, 'appears to have been the subject of a seventeenth-century reduced form of foundation sacrifice'.³⁰

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 pinned down with wooden pegs.³¹ 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.³² 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 were probably concealed at the end of the nineteenth century or early twentieth century.³³ Many more examples of cats that 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, several individuals reported modern cases where cats have gone missing during building and later discovered sealed into places where it would have been impossible not to have noticed the presence of a cat.³⁴ This suggests that the practice has occurred recently 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 that can be found in buildings for obvious reasons. From speaking with builders it has become apparent that a very large number of dried cats are discovered but never reported. They are usually thrown away or burned and as a result very few well-documented cases survive compared to the considerable amount of anecdotal references that exist for them. In the survey only 139 documented cases of dried cats have been reported for England. Of these only sixteen (12 per cent) are pre-1700, seventeen (12 per cent) are post-1700 and the remainder of 106 (76 per cent) could not be dated. This illustrates clearly how difficult it can be to arrive at a date for when these animals were placed in the buildings. It is likely that many more remain to be discovered in buildings.

Horse skulls

Concealed horse skulls and other animal bones have been found throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. The survey has collected a total of fifty-four examples of these in England, of which eleven (20 per cent) were pre-1700, seven (13 per cent) were post-1700 and thirty-six (67 per cent) have not been assigned a date. It is likely that many finds of bones and skulls in buildings shared the same fate as dried cats and ended up on rubbish tips. It also seems to be the case that many of these objects are not reported when they are discovered. 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,³⁵ and 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 need to be considered.

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.³⁶ In almost every area of Ireland it was reported that horse 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.³⁷ Similarly in Herefordshire at an inn called the Portway in Staunton-on-Wye at least twenty-four horse skulls were found screwed to the underside of the floor where they were reputed 'to make the fiddle go better'.³⁸ Ó Súilleabháin 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.³⁹

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, because it helped produce a pleasant ringing tone while threshing. Sandklef's ultimate conclusion was that horse skulls were only concealed for acoustic purposes and that the foundation sacrifice theory was invalid.⁴⁰ Eurwyn Wiliam, in his recent study of horse

skulls in Wales, concluded after considering both theories, that the real answer to this practice remains unclear. He did, however, think it 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'. This essentially supports an ancient origin for the practice, but in William's view this changed in Wales from the eighteenth century onwards due to the interest in the acoustic properties of new chapels and the importance of the horse in the development of agriculture.⁴¹

In several cases where horse skulls have been discovered the acoustic theory does not appear to be relevant. In Elsdon Church, Northumberland, for example, a box containing three horse skulls was discovered in the bell turret during restoration work in 1837.⁴² It seems unlikely that these skulls were concealed to aid acoustics in that location. Another 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.⁴³ Evidence from horse skulls found at Bay Farm Cottage, Carnlough, Co. Antrim also suggests that no acoustic function could be derived from the placing of at least ten horse skulls beneath a floor.⁴⁴

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. The horse serves 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. Much of the folklore associated with the horse concerns luck and it has been said that the horse skull brought luck into the house, but how this association began is not clear. The example of the three horse skulls discovered in the church at Elsdon perhaps suggest a link with the original function of church bells, to scare spirits away while calling people to prayer, but this is the only known example of horse skulls found in this location. The placing of horse skulls and other animal bones in buildings appears to have no practical function and it can only be assumed that some other purpose was intended. The concealed nature of the items suggests that they (along with the other items described in this paper) were positioned in secret, which may have contributed to the perceived importance of the act.

Concealed shoes

Concealed shoes are by far the most commonly encountered objects discovered in houses. It seems that wherever an individual begins researching them, a very large number of reports turn up of people who have discovered

them but not realised their significance. The Concealed Shoes Index at Northampton Central Museum receives on average one find per month and Andrew Mackay, former Keeper of the Boot and Shoe Collection, is of the opinion that there are probably hundreds of finds every year that are simply not recorded and that the amount they receive is merely the 'tip of the iceberg'.⁴⁵ By February 1998 the index recorded over 1100 examples primarily from Britain, but with some from as far away as Canada. The date range of the finds is interesting and appears to be proportionally related to surviving buildings from the period concerned, until the twentieth century when the practice appears to have gone into serious decline. For instance, pre-1600s there are around fifty examples, between 1600 and 1699 around 200, between 1700 and 1799 approximately 270, between 1800 and 1899 around 500, and post-1900 around fifty.⁴⁶ The decline in the twentieth century may be due to there being no need to investigate chimneys and other house structures of this period because they are still in good repair. Most of the finds have been discovered during demolition work or alterations to buildings and are usually discarded as rubbish.

Denise Dixon-Smith, Assistant Keeper of the Boot and Shoe Collection (1986–90), states that the most common places to find concealed shoes are chimneys, walls, under floorboards and in roofs, but they can also be found around doors, windows and staircases. She suggests that, 'One reason for hiding shoes in chimneys and around doors may have been because these were "openings" where evil spirits could enter the home, and the shoe – as a good luck symbol – should warn them off.'⁴⁷ Ralph Merrifield suggested that the practice may have derived from one of England's unofficial saints, John Schorn of Buckinghamshire.⁴⁸ He was alleged to have performed the remarkable feat of conjuring the devil into his boot. This legend, Merrifield continues, may have resulted in shoes being seen as some kind of spirit trap, which might explain many of the locations in which they are found.⁴⁹ Alternatively the legend may be the first written account of a long-practised folk magic technique. Further to beliefs concerning shoes, Reginald Scot mentioned that spitting on shoes was a form of protection against witchcraft.⁵⁰ There are other theories about how the practice developed.

There appears to be a link between shoes and fertility, but whether this has anything to do with the practice of concealing shoes at entry and exit points in a building is another matter. For example, Roy Palmer in *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester* cites a very recent account from Broadwas-on-Teme where in 1960 a midwife refused to allow a young woman to remove her shoes until her child was born.⁵¹ Merrifield notes the old rhyme, 'there was an old woman who lived in a shoe ...' as being further evidence of the connection with fertility, and states that in Lancashire women used to try on the shoes of women who had just given birth in order to try and conceive.⁵² This seems to relate to the personal nature of shoes and is reminiscent

of the old American Indian practice of enemies walking in one another's shoes in order to empathise more deeply – in this case to hopefully 'catch' something of the new mother. E. and M. A. Radford, in their *Encyclopedia of Superstitions*, recite an old method for young ladies to have dreams of their future partners. It involved pinning their garters to a wall and arranging their shoes in the form of a 'T' and singing a short rhyme.⁵³ June Swann, the pioneer of the study of concealed shoes, is of the opinion, however, that the practice is probably a male ritual owing to the fact that the shoes need to be concealed during building and thinks that it may be a symbolic substitute for ancient practices related to making sacrifices at the foundations of new buildings.⁵⁴ However, Timothy Easton has shown that many places where shoes were concealed could be accessed by the occupants and has termed them 'spiritual middens'. In these circumstances it is possible for the occupants to add to the objects in the spiritual midden over time. These cavities, which can be often filled, occur where chimneystacks have been inserted into buildings and dead spaces have been created.⁵⁵

June Swann states, 'Apart from 20 unworn shoes, all other concealed shoes are in a worn condition and they have taken on some of the character of the wearer.'⁵⁶ This does indicate the personal nature of shoes and would seem to support some kind of ritual connected with making a place more personal to the person who conceals the shoe. Fiona Pitt suggests that in some cases concealing shoes may have been a way for people of limited literacy to 'leave their mark' in places of deep personal significance.⁵⁷ Another theory suggested by Merrifield is that some relatives may have simply been unable to throw away the shoes of their dead kinfolk because of the intensely personal character of worn shoes.⁵⁸ These seem to be very plausible explanations for the practice but they do not account for the often very specific locations of the finds at exit and entry points into the building, which seems to favour an explanation in terms of warding off evil spirits. The locations of horse, chicken and cat remains in buildings is similar to that of shoes and seems to be related to fear of evil spirits, providing possible support for this particular theory about shoes. Merrifield seems to further confirm this by stating that the drawn outline of shoes is sometimes found scratched on to lead roofs, often on churches.⁵⁹

At The Old Vicarage in Upchurch, Kent, six concealed shoes were discovered during demolition of the central chimney stack. They comprise three ladies' walking slippers and three shoes, probably for male children of varying ages. All the shoes are of leather and are provisionally dated to 1740–1820.⁶⁰ This implies that the clergy, or more likely their servants, took part in house protection. At Little Moreton Hall in 1992 eighteen assorted boots and shoes were discovered which have all been dated to the nineteenth century.⁶¹ A single left shoe, dated to after 1850, was discovered in a fireplace in Goole in the East Riding of Yorkshire.⁶² At Geddington, Northamptonshire, a shoe

was found in the thatch of an eighteenth-century building.⁶³ These examples are all typical reports illustrative of the kind of circumstances in which shoes are discovered.

Written charms

Written charms were usually the result of people's need to have their property or livestock protected from supernatural attack. The evidence suggests that the person in need would generally contact the local cunning-man or wise-woman and ask him or her for a charm to protect the desired creatures or buildings. The charms themselves, through their combination of symbols and carefully laid-out text, are almost artistic in appearance. They frequently include astrological and occult symbols, and Christian invocations to God to protect the relevant items.⁶⁴

It is not sufficient to look at the text alone when studying a written charm as clearly a great deal of effort and care went into the appearance and nature of the symbols. The word triangle of 'abracadabra' decreasing down to just 'a' is also often encountered. These magical components to the charm appear to have been ways of adding more power to the charm. Written charms are as much artefacts as documents and the secret placing of them in buildings is an act as important as their contents. The text and associated symbols are all usually fitted on to a rather small piece of paper and very carefully handwritten. The charm is then folded and placed into a gap between timbers at the most convenient threshold or other location in the building concerned. One example was found folded inside a small sheet of lead and inserted into a gap above a doorframe, and sometimes charms are found inside bottles.

Although the focus in this paper is on the evidence from England the following extract from a charm found in Sarn in Wales is typical of many found in England:

Lord Jesus Christ his redeemer and saviour he will releve William Pentrynant his cows, calves, milk, butter, cattle of all ages, mares, suckers, horses, of all ages yews, lambs, sheep of all ages, pigs, sows and prosper him in all his farm and from all witchcraft and Evil diseases amen xxx.⁶⁵

Here it is clear that William Pentrynant believed that witches could cause damage to him and his livestock. Another example from Stalbridge in Dorset included phrases such as, 'Let this be a safe guard to this house', and 'Remove the Evil from this house'. This particular example was found inside a six-sided bottle beneath the floorboards of a house in the village. Another interesting example is of a nineteenth-century doll with a curse attached which was found during the rebuilding of an old house in Hereford.⁶⁶ Written charms have also been found in Lancashire, Yorkshire, Somerset, Devon, Gloucestershire and Shropshire.

Written charms were deposited in a manner similar to that of witch-bottles, shoes, horse skulls and cats, and secrecy was clearly an element in the way that these charms were handled. Unlike the other objects found in buildings, however, the meaning and reason for concealing a written charm in a building is obvious from the wording of the text. The juxtaposition of astrological and occult symbolism in the same document is very informative regarding the nature of the beliefs of the people who constructed them. It appears that the emphasis was on invoking power, whether religious, astrological or magical. So far, only twenty-one charms have been reported from England. Of these only two were pre-1700 and seven post-1700. The remaining twelve have not been dated. The fragility of these written charms is in large part responsible for the small numbers that have been recorded.

Other finds

The objects detailed in this paper are the most frequently encountered types but there are other objects which were also placed in buildings, presumably for magical purposes. Such finds reported to the author include: dolls (one cut in half), rats, toads, belt buckles, pipes, coins, knives and garments. Other finds worthy of note include a complete pig skeleton under a floor in Norfolk, a human skull and crossbones from beneath a nineteenth-century public house, an entire donkey buried under a barn, a dried puppy and several dried hares. Many artefacts from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages have also been found concealed in buildings. Stone axes and flint arrowheads were thought to be particularly effective against lightning and were known as thunder-stones. They were believed to have been created where lightning struck the ground.⁶⁷ All of these appear to have been considered as part of the spiritual armoury of the house.

Ritual marks in buildings may represent another type of magical protection, as pioneering work by Timothy Easton suggests. The marks are usually lightly inscribed and are generally found on chimney lintels and other timbers in buildings. In order to see them it is often necessary to shine a torch obliquely along the beam. They often include 'M', 'W' and 'V' marks, which appear to have been created as an invocation to the Virgin Mary in many cases. These marks have been very thoroughly investigated by Timothy Easton in the county of Suffolk where a very large number of examples have been recorded.⁶⁸ The marks have been reported from as far apart as Yorkshire, Wiltshire, Cornwall, Wales and Scotland but they are not well represented in the survey as this is not the kind of record that museums or archaeological establishments keep. A number of ritual marks have been dated to the eighteenth century with one particular type known as the 'daisy wheel' being of a definitely earlier date. Another form of possible ritual marking are so-called 'witch-posts', which have been found in twenty-two houses in

North Yorkshire and parts of Lancashire dating to the early modern period. They are upright supporting timbers found on the ground floor near the entrance or the hearth which usually have a 'St Andrews cross' cut into the upper portion of the timber. It is not certain what their specific function is although it is generally accepted that they are a form of house protection.⁶⁹

All these archaeological finds provide material evidence for the continued preoccupation with witchcraft and evil influences from the early modern period through to the early twentieth century. They are tangible links with the magical beliefs of the past, and in some cases they are the only surviving testament to ritual practices absent from the written record. Although the survey has revealed very large numbers of objects they undoubtedly only represent a very small portion of the objects that were originally concealed, while many more remain to be discovered and reported. The archaeological record illuminates our historical understanding of witchcraft and the popular fear of misfortune by providing primary physical evidence of individual actions, and therefore requires more consideration from those researching the cultural history of witchcraft and magic.

Notes

- 1 Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (London, 1987).
- 2 The results presented here represent the state of the evidence in 2001.
- 3 Many instances occurred where a museum reported no finds of interest, only for another expert or sometimes another member of the museum staff to correct this. It appears to depend on the staff's familiarity with the items held in store in many cases.
- 4 Note that this figure of 749 relates only to items reported to me, not to the large number of concealed shoes recorded by Northampton Central Museum's Concealed Shoes Index, started by June Swann.
- 5 Find reports are still being collected for this project via my website. See <http://www.folkmagic.co.uk>.
- 6 It should be noted that bottles were sometimes used for other kinds of magic, notably certain love spells.
- 7 This is a colloquial name, the technical term is 'bartmann' stoneware: see David Gaimster, *German Stoneware 1200–1900* (London, 1997).
- 8 John Allan, 'Some Post-Medieval Documentary Evidence for the Trade in Ceramics', in Peter Davey and Richard Hodges (eds), *Ceramics and Trade – The Production and Distribution of Later Medieval Pottery in North-West Europe* (Sheffield, 1983), pp. 37–45.
- 9 The naming and chronology of bellarmine stoneware is discussed in M. R. Holmes, 'The So-Called "Bellarmine" Mask on Imported Rhenish Stoneware', *Antiquaries Journal* 31 (1950) 173–9.
- 10 Ralph Merrifield, 'The Use of Bellarmine as Witch-Bottles', *Guildhall Miscellany* 3 (1954) 3–15.
- 11 Cited in George L. Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), p. 102.
- 12 Glanvill, *Sadducismus Triumphatus* (1681), pp. 205–8; cited in Merrifield, 'The Use of Bellarmine', 9.

- 13 Blagrave, *Astrological Practice of Physick* (1671), pp. 154–5; cited in Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 170.
- 14 Cornwall Record Office no X268/83; cited in Jason Semmens, 'The Usage of Witch-Bottles and Apotropaic Charms in Cornwall', *Old Cornwall* 12, 6 (2000) 25–30.
- 15 See Barry, 'Public infidelity and private belief?', in this volume.
- 16 Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture 1736–1951* (Manchester, 1999) pp. 19, 218.
- 17 Analysis of the contents of bottles is currently in progress and absolute figures have not yet been established.
- 18 At present the only published example of Dr Massey's work on witch-bottles is, Alan Massey and Tony Edmonds, 'The Reigate Witch Bottle', *Current Archaeology* 169 (2000) 34–6.
- 19 R. W. Brunskill, *Traditional Buildings of Britain: An Introduction to Vernacular Architecture* (London, [1981] 1992), p. 110.
- 20 David Bonner, *Archaeological Investigations at All Saints Church, Loughton, Milton Keynes*, Buckinghamshire County Museum Archaeological Service, July 1994, County Museum Technical Centre; Buckinghamshire Sites and Monuments Record, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire.
- 21 For one example see Owen Davies, *A People Bewitched: Witchcraft and Magic in Nineteenth-Century Somerset* (Bruton, 1999), p. 89.
- 22 Ernest W. Tilley, 'A Witch-Bottle from Gravesend', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 80 (1965) 252–6.
- 23 This is an example of unclear recording. The builders kindly donated the objects to the local heritage centre but details were not collected at the time.
- 24 A date for the shoes was kindly provided by staff at the Boot and Shoe Collection at Northampton Central Museum and Art Gallery.
- 25 My gratitude must be extended to Alan Massey for permission to use his unpublished research here.
- 26 Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 182. Many witches from the US, Australia, Europe and England have informed me via email 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. 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.
- 27 Margaret M. Howard, 'Dried Cats', *Man* 51 (1951) 149–51.
- 28 Howard, 'Dried Cats', 151.
- 29 Howard, 'Dried Cats', 150.
- 30 John Sheehan, 'A Seventeenth Century Dried Cat from Ennis Friary, Co. Clare', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal* 32 (1990) 64–8.
- 31 Howard, 'Dried Cats'.
- 32 Thanks to Keswick Museum and Art Gallery, Fitz Park, Station Road, Keswick, Cumbria, CA12 4NF, for this information.
- 33 Thanks to Jean and Phil Griffiths of Parracombe, North Devon, for this information.
- 34 Personal communication, Dorset and Gloucestershire areas.
- 35 Philip L. Armitage, 'The Use of Animal Bones as Building Material in Post-Medieval Britain', in D. Serjeantson and T. Waldron (eds), *Diet and Crafts in Towns: The Evidence of Animal Remains from the Roman to Post-Medieval Periods*, BAR British Series 199 (Oxford, 1989), pp. 147–60.
- 36 Seán Ó Súilleabháin, 'Foundation Sacrifices', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 75 (1945) 45–52.
- 37 Ó Súilleabháin, 'Foundation Sacrifices', 45–9.

- 38 Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 123.
- 39 Ó Súilleabháin, 'Foundation Sacrifices', 49–50.
- 40 Albert Sandklef, 'Singing Flails: A Study in Threshing-Floor Constructions, Flail Threshing Traditions and the Magic Guarding of the House', *FF Communications* 56, 136 (1949).
- 41 Eurwyn Wiliam, 'Concealed Horse Skulls: Testimony and Message', in Trefor M. Owen (ed.), *From Corrib to Cultra – Folklife Essays in Honour of Alan Gailey* (Belfast, 2000), pp. 136–49.
- 42 Thanks to Northumberland National Park Authority, Eastburn, South Park, Hexham, Northumberland, NE46 1BS, for confirming these details.
- 43 Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 124.
- 44 Jim Mallory and Finbar McCormick, 'Horse Skulls at Bay Farm Cottage, Carnlough', *The Glynn's – Journal of the Glens of Antrim Historical Society*, 12 (1984) 50–3.
- 45 Andrew Mackay, 'Northampton Museums Concealed Shoe Index', Northampton Museum, 16 April 1991.
- 46 Fiona Pitt, 'Builders, Bakers and Madhouses: Some Recent Information from the *Concealed Shoe Index*', a report on a talk she gave at the Archaeological Leather Group AGM in September 1997 contained in an article, 'Hidden Shoes and Concealed Beliefs', *Archaeological Leather Group Newsletter* (February 1998) 5.
- 47 Denise Dixon-Smith, 'Concealed Shoes', *Archaeological Leather Group Newsletter* 6 (1990).
- 48 According to John Vince, *Discovering Saints in Britain* (Aylesbury, [1969] 1979), p. 20, Sir John Schorne died in 1308 and was Rector of North Marston, Buckinghamshire.
- 49 Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 135.
- 50 E. and M. A. Radford (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Superstitions*, edited and revised by Christina Hole (London, [1948] 1978), p. 319.
- 51 Roy, Palmer, *The Folklore of Hereford and Worcester* (Almeley, 1992), p. 87.
- 52 Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 134.
- 53 Radford, *Encyclopedia*, p. 169.
- 54 June Swann, 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', a report she gave at the Archaeological Leather Group AGM in September 1997, published as part of 'Hidden Shoes and Concealed Beliefs', *Archaeological Leather Group Newsletter* (February 1998), 2–6. For further details on June Swann's research the following two papers are recommend; 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', *Costume Society Journal* 30 (1996) 56–69; and 'Shoes Concealed in Buildings', *Journal of Northampton Art Gallery and Museum* (December 1996) 8–21.
- 55 Timothy Easton, 'Spiritual Middens', in Paul Oliver (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Cambridge, 1997).
- 56 Swann, 'Hidden Shoes', 2.
- 57 Pitt, 'Hidden Shoes', 6.
- 58 Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 134.
- 59 Merrifield, *Archaeology*, p. 135.
- 60 Michael Moad, 'The Old Vicarage, Upchurch and the Discovery of Leather Shoes', *Kent Archaeological Review* (Autumn 1976) 110–12.
- 61 Emily Brooks, 'Watch Your Step', *The National Trust Magazine* 91 (Autumn 2000) 66–8.
- 62 Thanks to Goole Museum and Art Gallery, c/o EYRC Offices, Church Street, Goole, East Riding of Yorkshire, DN14 5BG, for this information.
- 63 Thanks to Milton Keynes Sites and Monuments Record, Milton Keynes Borough Council, Planning Department, PO Box 112, Civic Offices, 1 Saxon Gate East, Milton Keynes, MK9 3HQ for this information.

- 64 For detailed discussion on the content of such charms see Owen Davies, *Cunning-Folk* (London and New York, 2002), ch. 6.
- 65 Ralph Merrifield, 'A Charm Against Witchcraft', *Country Life* (23 June 1955) 1612–13.
- 66 Thanks to Jeremy Harte for information regarding the former. The latter charm is held in Hereford City Museum.
- 67 See, for example, Stephen H. Penney, 'Axes, Arrowheads and Other Antiquities in Irish Folklore', *Ulster Folklife* 22 (1976) 70–5.
- 68 Timothy Easton, 'Ritual Marks on Historic Timber', *Weald and Downland Open Air Museum Magazine* (Spring 1999) 22–30.
- 69 Mary Nattrass, 'Witch-Posts', *Gwerin* 3 (1960–62) 254–67.