



## Preface

Hidden within the fabric of buildings all over the world, waiting to be exposed by demolition, renovation or repair, there remains the evidence of magical house protection. These objects and animals were secretly tucked away to act as a layer of protection against all manner of supernatural dangers. Some of these ideas persist, with many examples from the twentieth century on record. In addition to objects like shoes, cats, bottles and horse skulls, people would also conceal written charms and inscribe markings designed to invoke the protection of the Virgin Mary or to distract the attention of evil spirits.

Some of these practices can be clearly traced back to medieval times and for others we only have substantial amounts of evidence from the seventeenth century onwards. Part of the reason for this is simply down to the quantity of buildings from the period which have survived, another part will be due to the survival of the materials over time. Marks on stone would normally be far more durable than a piece of paper tucked between beams or a cat wedged in a roof space.

The advent of the printing press and the dissemination of frightening tales regarding witchcraft likely raised awareness and fears, leading to the popularisation of counter-witchcraft practices such as these. Clearly the period of the witch trials, which varies in different countries but broadly occurred between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, also had an impact on the need for personal spiritual protection.

The fairly arbitrary divide between the work of archaeologists and historians means that in the history of witchcraft there has only been the occasional nod towards this physical evidence. This is mainly due to the fact that, with the exception of witch-bottles, there is no contemporary written evidence for these practices. It is quite striking how absent this mass of physical evidence regarding people's beliefs about

witchcraft and the supernatural is from the large body of work which is out there about the history of witchcraft. What we tend to see in those books (but not all) is a concentration on trial records where elite beliefs about witchcraft are imposed upon accused and accusers, producing a distorted account of supposed witchcraft, often based on false accusations in the first place. It is all fascinating to read about but, essentially, the witch trials may teach us a lot but they are not necessarily the best place to look for information about what ordinary people thought about witchcraft.

This subject area fell into the gaps between the disciplines of history and archaeology with historians not wanting to address artefacts for which there were no records (except for witch-bottles) and archaeologists (with a few notable exceptions) not treating these objects seriously when found in otherwise very interesting standing buildings. I have spoken to many archaeologists who have told me anecdotes of finding bottles, shoes and cats which did not find their way into archives or dig reports.

The other issue which has always affected this topic is that the main finders of the artefacts are builders who are not always in the best situation to record and report the objects they find. Many objects end up in the builder's skip or for sale on the black market. To their credit, however, a large number of objects they encounter do find their way into local museums where it then depends on the diligence of the member of staff and their collections policy as to whether the finds are properly accessioned and interpreted. One independent museum I visited had a box of old shoes and fragments of bellarmine which people had brought in, but they had not recorded the address of the properties, their context within the building or even the name of the finder. Most museums are professional of course and uphold good standards in this regard but that case was not entirely unusual.

The objects which are the subject of this book are not generally mentioned in any primary or secondary material regarding witchcraft and yet they are extremely numerous, widespread and testify tangibly to the beliefs people held. Here we can see the beliefs of these people whose voices are usually not heard laid bare in physical form through these artefacts.

These objects testify to people's acute fears regarding witchcraft and other supernatural dangers. They are the actual counter-spells which were created in an everyday battle with perceived forces of evil which, it was believed, existed all around them. That people turned to these methods so readily shows that the church alone was unable to provide the kind of protection people felt they needed and also that belief in the

supernatural was a normal part of their existence. Indeed, we often find these artefacts and symbols in churches too so people clearly thought that even churches were vulnerable.

The most popular locations to conceal objects within buildings are usually at portals such as the hearth, the threshold and also voids or dead spaces. This suggests that people believed it was possible for dark forces to travel through the landscape and attack them in their homes. Whether these forces were emanations from a witch in the form of a spell, a witch's familiar pestering their property, an actual witch flying in spirit or a combination of all of those is difficult to tell. Additional sources of danger could be ghosts, fairies and demons. People went to great lengths to ensure their homes and property were protected, highlighting the fact that these beliefs and fears were visceral and, as far as they were concerned, literally terrifying.

The pioneer of research in this area was Ralph Merrifield whose 1987 *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* led to this book. He had published many papers from the 1950s onwards which examined witch-bottles, written charms and other objects. In his work he also drew on the research of Britain's foremost expert on historic footwear, June Swann, who had begun researching the area of concealed shoes at around the same time as he began his work. Margaret Howard's paper on dried cats also received a mention. Merrifield had a network of correspondents including Jennie Cobban, Janet Pennington and Timothy Easton who have all made significant contributions to this field over the years. Easton, in particular, pioneered the study of protective marks, an area not covered by Merrifield.

Against that backdrop my own research began in 1999 with a huge survey of museums and archaeological establishments in the UK. The raw data that came in from that survey, and the numerous reports submitted to the Apotropaiois website each week from all over the world, have contributed to the largest database of objects of this type. This research has also featured in TV programmes in the UK on Sky Discovery, Channel 4, BBC2, and ABC Australia, and on several radio stations; there have also been features in national newspapers. Each time some new research is published there is an upsurge in reports, as indeed will probably occur on the publication of this work.

People who discover these objects, from whatever background, normally experience great curiosity about the objects and get in touch for advice about how to deal with this new element to their home's history and heritage. Some become incredibly superstitious about the objects and can become very fearful of the consequences of it leaving the building for analysis. It is really quite remarkable the extent to which people

can experience a deep-rooted emotional response when these discoveries are made. At times they seem to make an almost visceral connection with the motivations and fears and of those who initially concealed them. This was the case with a witch-bottle discovered in Suffolk where the owner requested a ceremonial re-interment of the bottle beneath the hearth which involved myself and some local nuns. Part of this was filmed for an episode of BBC2's *History Detectives* back in 2007.

Another example of these emerging feelings upon discovering a formerly concealed object was reported in 2001 from Curry Rivel in Somerset. The correspondent reported via email:

About 40 years ago my grandfather found sealed behind the jamb of the front door the leg of a wooden toy, with painted stocking. They left it out for a few days, when, it is claimed, the atmosphere of the house became disturbed, strange noises were heard etc. As soon as my grandfather replaced it and resealed it, calm returned. However, as my grandmother was decidedly fanciful I remain fairly sceptical about the claimed effects.

The study of concealed objects is gaining in popularity and there are now people working on it in various areas: in the USA (Walter Wheeler, Patrick Donmoyer, Professor Marshall Becker, Dr Riley Auge and Chris Manning); in Australia (Dr Ian Evans); in Romania (Adina Hulubaş); in France (Nicholas Vernot); in Finland (Sonja Hukantaival); and in the world of speleology, where Linda Wilson and Chris Binding have been making amazing discoveries in caves (mainly in Somerset at present).

In the UK a whole host of people have begun engaging in regional research and a few have started to conduct national surveys very similar to the one I carried out in 1999 and which led to this book. One of the most interesting recent developments is the English Medieval Graffiti Survey established by Matt Champion. It has spawned a host of enthusiasts who now find and record graffiti and share their photos and thoughts via the Survey's social media output. A large portion of the marks reported are of the building protection type so there is now a bigger body of evidence than ever from all parts of England and beyond.

The evidence is telling us that counter-witchcraft, house protection and good luck charms which were inserted into and carved onto buildings were spread through global trade and travel. It also tells us that people generally believed in supernatural forces of all kinds and were prepared to expend considerable time and effort in order to alleviate their fears regarding them. These practices continued well into the twentieth century and in some areas continue to this day. Despite the

lack of written sources, enough finds are emerging for the true purpose of these objects to become evident.

This book is divided into two parts: the first deals with the context and principal find types in this subject area, the second focuses on some case studies and includes a gazetteer of discoveries from Britain. When I first began this research back in 1999 the first task was to survey a representative sample of the museums and archaeological units across the UK. This took the form of a postal survey with a list of questions asking the establishment to describe what kind of objects they held which may fall into the house protection category. The response was quite good and I established a database of finds from all parts of the UK. Since that time people have been reporting objects to me following lectures I have given, in response to press releases and articles, following TV appearances and by searching for the topic online and discovering my website. The reports have become more international over the years with the global spread of internet usage.

At the time of writing I have been studying this subject area for some twenty years and this book represents an attempt to distil what I have learned into hard copy. The theories presented in this book are the best I have at this point in time; as new discoveries continue to emerge and more new scholars enter the field, I am sure they will be challenged and modified – perhaps even by myself.