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## The spooky secrets hidden in Britain's walls

Zahra Pettican 25 October 2019




In the past, Britons would secure their houses against supernatural forces by burying lucky talismans deep within their walls. Here are some of archaeologists' creepier discoveries...

Today, we do everything we can to [secure our homes from intruders](#). It was the same between the 16th and 18th centuries, but in those days even the sturdiest doors and locks couldn't keep out a more menacing danger. It didn't matter whether you lived in a [castle](#) or a cottage, nowhere was safe from malevolent supernatural forces which could supposedly breach the smallest gaps between walls, doors and windows.

It became common for families to hide protective charms in the most vulnerable areas in their homes—usually in the walls close to entrances, under floorboards and inside chimneys.

This folk magic was termed “apotropaic” and originated from the Greek “apotropaïos”, meaning “to turn away evil”. Thought to ward off bad spirits and witches, the ritual objects included shoes, mummified cats and small bottles.

### Why were people so afraid of supernatural forces?

 **every forest suggesting supernatural forces**

Parasites and diseases like dysentery were rife in the days before antibiotics and modern medicine. Hygiene wasn't a priority, so everything from a cut finger to childbirth could prove fatal.

People developed [superstitious beliefs](#) to cope with a cruel and unpredictable world. The inconsolable parents of a stillborn child wouldn't know of infections, so perhaps a curse from a beggar seemed the only likely cause.

[Supernatural paranoia](#) reached its peak between the 15th and 18th centuries with an estimated 100,000 people [accused of witchcraft](#) across Europe. Although the witch hysteria died down, some of the old traditions continued.

As families emigrated, they hid objects in the walls of their new homes—perhaps as a kind of supernatural insurance policy in a strange land.

## What concealed objects have been found?

### Mummified cats and cat bones

#### cat remains in a museum

Dried cats and rats from the Stag Inn, All Saints Street, Hastings. Image via Wiki Commons

Of all the objects people find bricked up in the walls and roof cavities of their homes, mummified cats are the most macabre.

Our feline friends have long been associated with psychic abilities so it's not surprising that they were one of the first defences against witchcraft and bad luck.

Some of the dried cats were arranged in a hunting pose as if to scare vermin or perhaps spiritual entities, such as witches' familiars (animal spirits).

In 2011, water engineers discovered a mummified cat in Pendle Hill, Lancashire. They found the unfortunate creature sealed in the wall of a buried cottage at the heart of the North's "witching country", where the infamous Pendle witch trials resulted in 10 executions in 1612. However, the remains of cats have been found in walls all over the UK, including a [Hastings' inn](#), a cottage in [Whitby](#) and a house in [Devon](#), suggesting that very few places were untroubled by fears of dark forces.

The mummification process usually occurs naturally through environmental conditions. But sometimes just bones are found as in the case of The Duke's Head Hotel in [King's Lynn](#), Norfolk. Interestingly, property owners sometimes put the cat remains back for luck during renovations.

### Shoes

#### concealed shoes

Concealed shoes discovered in East Anglia. Image via Wiki Commons

Thousands of well-worn and patched-up single shoes and boots have been found in all types of buildings, including Hampton Court Palace and Winchester Cathedral. Northampton Museum even maintains a [Concealed Shoe Index](#), listing 2,000 worldwide locations where shoes have been discovered.

It's a mystery why footwear was such a popular choice, but it's been suggested that since shoes are moulded to an individual's feet over time, they contain the imprint of their character. Children's shoes were preferred, presumably because the innocence of youth would be a more powerful deterrent against evil.

Beginning in the Middle Ages, the tradition lasted hundreds of years and concealed shoes have been found in Europe, the US and Australia. An isolated [farmhouse in Tasmania](#) harboured 38 shoes, along with a dead cat and a selection of 19th-century toys. The English family who had settled in the house had been besieged by tragedy so they sought refuge in magical customs out of fear and desperation.

### Bottles


#### witch bottle

Early 19th-century witch bottle from Lincolnshire, England. Image via Wiki Commons

Our 17th-century ancestors thought they could bottle magic. Witch bottles are small containers made from stoneware or glass and found close to hearths or thresholds in buildings. They were filled with all manner of things from the mundane (pins, thorns and pieces of heart-shaped fabric) to the more stomach-churning (hair, nail clippings, small bones and urine). Iron nails were popular since this metal had a reputation for repelling dark magic.

The bottle would supposedly break once the evil-doer died, so if you find one intact, watch out! The [Museum of London](#) is currently cataloguing a collection of witch bottles.

## Witch markings

 a pentagram witch mark

Apotropaic marking on a farmhouse from Niemelä Tenant Farm, now exhibited at Seurasaari Open Air Museum in Finland. Image via Wiki Commons

Finally, if you have an old house, look out for witch markings. These often hide in plain sight and take the form of flower-shaped patterns called hexafoils carved onto beams, fireplaces or around entrances.

Also known as apotropaic marks, these symbols also include pentagrams and intertwined letters such as "VM" (the Virgin Mary). The largest discovery was recently made in [Creswell Crags](#) where terrified locals once thought the Midlands' caves were a gateway to the underworld. They protected it by etching hundreds of markings onto the walls like ancient graffiti.

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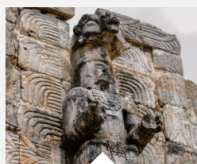
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