

Touching Magic

The Material Culture of Magic in
19th-century Australia

Deliberately Concealed Objects in Old Houses and Buildings

Household and personal items were deposited in voids in houses and other buildings in Britain for many centuries. These were thought to decoy evil spiritual beings from the underworld into cavities from which they could not escape. Such beings were believed to be under the control of witches or the Devil to cause harm to humans.

The concealment ritual was brought to Australia from 1788 onward by British administrators, convicts and settlers but was only discovered here in 2004. Objects concealed included shoes, garments, domestic artifacts and dead cats.

Since then a great many caches of such objects have been discovered throughout Australia. Buildings where these have been found include houses, public buildings including courthouses, police stations, convict commissariats, State Parliaments, a lighthouse, the Manchester Unity building in Melbourne and the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The ritual resulted in the preservation of the only convict shirts to survive and thus gave us a unique glimpse of early colonial life.

Although long thought to be a desert as far as the practice of magic was concerned, we now know that Australia was far from that. Research into the lost and secret history of magic in Australia is writing a new chapter in the story of this country.



This convict shirt was concealed in a wall of the Superintendent's cottage, Bridgewater, Tasmania, and is now in the National Museum of Australia, Canberra.



A cache from under the floor of the parlour in an old cottage in Jessie Street, Richmond, Victoria.

WHERE TO FIND CONCEALED OBJECTS

Points of entry to a building are often protected by concealments. These might include the chimney, front and back doorways, windows, attic spaces (and stairs leading down from them) and subfloor areas.

WHAT MIGHT BE FOUND?

- Shoes. These are always old and are often in very poor condition. It is usual to find only one shoe from the pair. Laces are generally missing. The majority of shoes found are those of children or young people.
- Items of clothing (shirts, trousers, hats, collars, etc.)
- Dead cats
- Bottles. If you come across a bottle that is sealed and/or seems to contain liquid or objects other than dirt, please contact us, keep it aside and do not attempt to open it. It may be a witch bottle, common enough in England but not yet found in Australia. We remain hopeful.
- Miscellaneous objects (less common).



An English witch bottle. An Australian witch bottle would probably be either glass or stoneware.

WHAT TO DO?

Take photographs of where they were found before they are removed (if possible),

Record where they were found (a plan of the house and property is useful),

Record exactly what and how many objects you have found.

Take photographs of the objects after they've been removed, so we can have a closer look.

PLEASE TELL US:

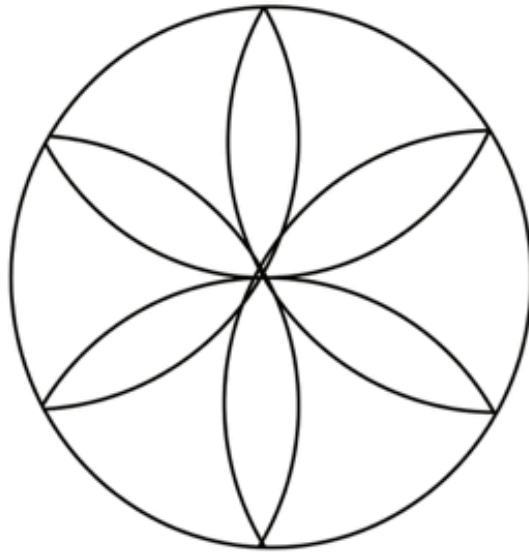
- Address of the property,
- Period (when was it built and has it been renovated or relocated previously)?
- Brief history of the property,
- Names and occupation of previous owners (if known),
- Your name and contact details

SEND YOUR INFO TO: ahiddenculture@gmail.com (Ruth) Dropbox folders are welcome.

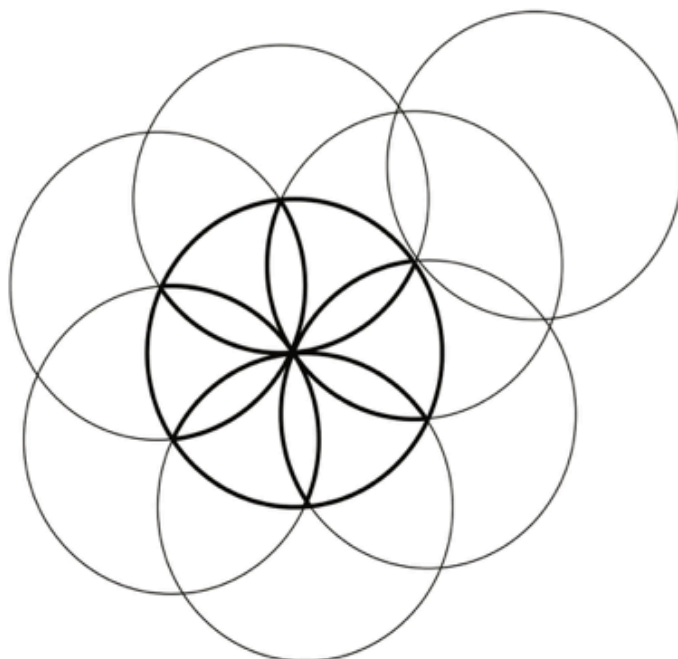
MAGIC MARKS

These are often referred to as 'apotropaic' marks. The word apotropaic comes from the Greek for evil-averting. The purpose of these marks was first identified by Timothy Easton of Suffolk in the 1980s.

The Hexafoil

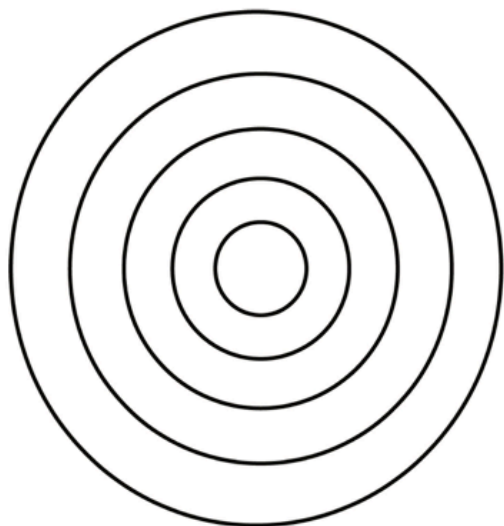


There are many different variations of hexafoils.

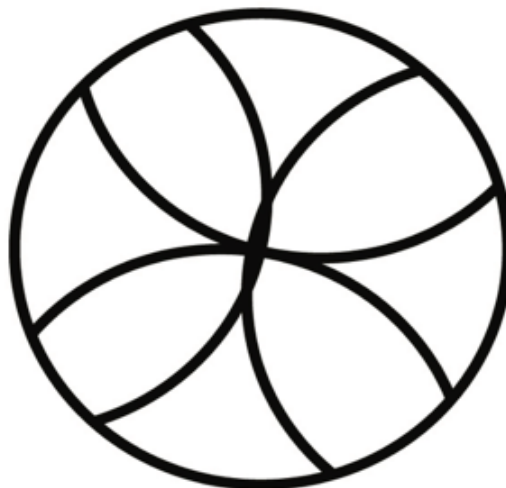


The places in which magic marks are found vary widely but, as with concealed objects, points of entry to buildings are likely locations, as are places where food is stored, prepared or served. The protection of livestock, especially horses, was important.

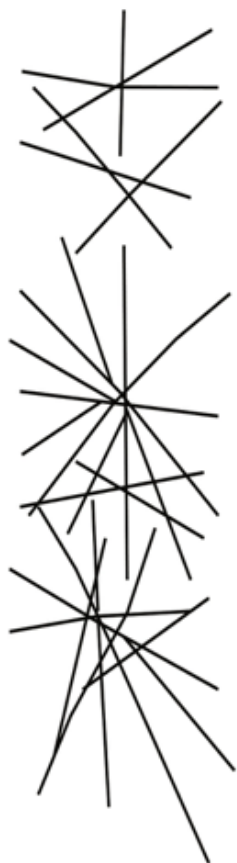
These marks have been found in numerous places in Tasmania, and in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.



CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

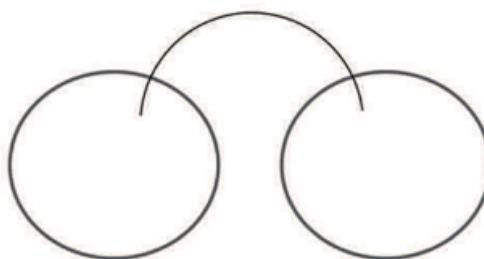


CONSECRATION CROSS



The Wish List

The Spectacle Mark



Merels, *at left*, have been found at *Shene, Narynna* and the former *Rose and Crown Inn*, Tasmania, and in the roof cavity of the old Mint building in Macquarie Street, Sydney.

We have yet to find a spectacle mark. These were intended to protect against the evil eye – a curse cast by the malevolent glare of a cunning person or witch. The recipient of one of these spells was said to have been “overlooked.”

Burn Marks

These are a comparatively recent find. John Dean, a retired senior archaeologist and Nick Hill, National Conservation Projects Manager, Historic England, have written papers about burn marks. In England they are often found on the lintel beam of fireplaces. In Australia, the Tasmanian Magic Project has found many burn marks in original 19th-century stables in the Tasmanian Midlands.

Burn marks are the result of deliberate and carefully executed actions. The flame of a candle or taper is held against woodwork until an initial mark is created. The ash is scraped away and the mark is burnt again. These actions are repeated until the mark may be carried a millimetre or more beneath the surface. Scratch marks are often found in these small recesses.

Burn marks in Tasmanian stables are commonly found on the heel posts at the entrance to horse stalls. They may also be on the timber partitions. Research has not yet been conducted to ascertain if the marks are also common in English stables. The only recorded find is in the stables at Whitmore Hall, Staffordshire.



Above, L – R: *Whitmore Hall*, c. 1610 – 1630. Other marks are from Tasmania’s Southern Midlands: *Bowsden*, *Ellesmere*, *Shene* and *Sherwood*.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND APOTROPAIC MARKS?

Tell us about them: we’d like to know the address of the building and the area of the building in which the marks are located. Photographs would be helpful.

To report finds, contact Dr. Ian Evans: email evansthebook@gmail.com or by phone to 0455 173 456.

Links that might be of interest:

ABC TV VIDEO & TRANSCRIPT:

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/landline/old-site/content/2014/s4105115.htm>

THE CONVERSATION:

<https://theconversation.com/these-walls-can-talk-australian-history-preserved-by-folk-magic-47636>

MAGIC PROJECT VIDEO: <https://youtu.be/tMmaWwrAXHY>