

Bellarmino witch-bottle, with original cork and contents—a cloth "heart" studded with pins, human hair and nail parings—found in Westminster.

(Block: Pitt-Rivers Museum)

FOLK-LORE IN LONDON ARCHAEOLOGY

By RALPH MERRIFIELD

Part 2: The Post-Roman Period *

THERE ARE few, if any, suggestions of a survival in the London area of the Celtic practice of making offerings to the river into post-Roman times, although the Thames and its tributaries were to play a part in superstitious practices of a different kind in the Stuart period. Concentrations of certain kinds of medieval and later antiquities do occur in the river-bed, but can readily be explained without recourse to folk-lore. Weapons were accidentally lost in brawls and skirmishes, and were sometimes deliberately dumped with completely rational motives. A proportion of the rather numerous daggers and

swords of the 14th century, found in the river in the City, may well have been sensibly "lost" by their owners when the revolt of 1381 was suppressed, since a weaponless rebel could more easily pass as an innocent citizen. Quantities of small knives of the 16th and 17th centuries, found in the River Fleet, and recently in a limited area of the Thames nearby in Upper Thames Street, may have reached their destination by way of the neighbouring Cutlers' Hall, since the Cutlers' Company had rights of confiscation when its regulations were contravened. It may be significant that a number of the knives and daggers among the recent finds from Upper Thames Street are bent sufficiently to make them quite un-

* Part 1 dealing with the Roman period, was published in the *London Archaeologist* 13.

serviceable—perhaps accidentally by the mechanical excavator, but more probably deliberately before they were thrown into the river.

Only in the case of the numerous medieval pilgrim badges and other religious emblems found in the Thames at London is there any suspicion that some superstitious practice might be involved. These pious souvenirs, brought back by pilgrims from shrines near and far, are seldom found except in rivers and streams. This, however, may well be due to the fact that water-logged mud is curiously kind to metals, and such frail objects of pewter would have little chance of survival in a recognizable form in the corrosive man-made soils elsewhere in the City. A single hat, blown into the Thames, might carry with it several of these little badges, so that accidental loss could easily account for apparent concentrations in the neighbourhood of London Bridge. Some confirmatory evidence, from documentary sources or from surviving practices, would therefore be necessary before it could be claimed that the pilgrim signs found in the Thames, Seine and other rivers were deliberately deposited there—but it remains a possibility.

Pots and other objects certainly continued to be placed intentionally beneath buildings or within their walls, like the votive deposits of Roman Britain. It is far from clear that they were put there for the same reason; all that can be said is that they served no obviously practical purpose. When the church of All Hallows, Lombard Street, was demolished, three late-13th century jugs were found built into a transverse wall of chalk towards the eastern end of the church, probably the west wall of a chapel at the north-east corner¹. They stood upright, several feet above the old floor level, and were evidently entirely enclosed. One of these jugs, still partly covered with mortar, is now in Guildhall Museum (Acc. No 16,754). They were quite empty when they were recovered by Mr. A. H. Oswald, but this was some time after their discovery. A very similar find of two jugs of the 14th-15th century was made in 1883, at a depth of 18 inches in the north wall of the chancel of St. Mary's Church, Bexley, about 2 feet above the level of the floor. According to an old label, at the bottom of one of these was a substance which under the microscope appeared to be the remains of a piece of parchment². This suggests that the jugs may have been receptacles for written charms, and in both cases the position of the vessels enclosed deeply within a wall seems to rule out the idea that they were "acoustic pots", intended to increase the volume of sound in the church—the usual explanation of the pots that are sometimes found set in the walls of churches with their mouths, open or merely plastered over, towards

1. *Antiq J.* 20 511.

2. *Archaeol Cantiana* 70 (1956) 260-1.

the interior; or else were set below the hollow floor of the choir stalls.

The use of "acoustic" pots itself falls into the category of folk-lore and superstition, since they can have had no appreciable effect, whatever result was obtained from the carefully placed and tuned bronze resonators which, according to Vitruvius, were used in the theatres of antiquity³. There is no doubt that some 15th century churchmen installed pots with the intention of improving the singing of the choir, for there is a definite record of this at Metz in 1432⁴. It may be suspected, however, that the practice owed as much to some earlier custom of placing pots in buildings as votive deposits—or as the containers of such deposits—as it did to the theories of Vitruvius. This is a complex question, which cannot be discussed here, but it may be significant that *horses' skulls* were also used to improve acoustics, in much the same way as pots⁵.

Acoustic pots are not invariably empty. One of those found beneath the choir stalls of St. George's Chapel, Windsor, in 1953, contained whole nuts (hazel and walnuts); cherry and plum-stones with leaves and twigs, giving the impression that some had been bunches of cherries and plums on the stalk; the dried heads of some kind of composite flower; charcoal; snail-shells; four pebbles; and two fragments of paper. Although the deposit was sufficiently old for many of the organic remains to crumble into dust as soon as they were touched, there is a strong suspicion that it was not placed in the 15th century pot until the 17th century. Under the mortar at the base of the pot were a few bones of ox and sheep, together with a *Brazil nut*, which cannot be earlier than that date. The presence of a marble tessera inside the pot suggests, in fact, that the deposit was made in the reign of James II, when the black and white marble paving was laid in the chancel⁶.

There are three instances of the burial of a single 17th century pot beneath a building in the City of London, and in two of these cases the pot was certainly deposited when the foundations were laid.

One is a brown-glazed kitchen pot, found in the

3. Vitruvius: *The Ten Books on Architecture*, Book V, Ch.V.
4. A Chronicle of the Celestins of Metz, in which the chronicler himself expresses doubt of the effectiveness of the pots; quoted by G. W. W. Minns in Notes on Acoustic Pottery, Norfolk Archaeological Society (1871).
5. In Ireland, a horse's skull was buried beneath the flagstone of the hearth, sometimes with a coin or a pot, to make the dancing sound better. (Seán O'Súilleabháin: "Foundation Sacrifices," *J. Roy Soc Antiqu Ireland*, 75 (1) 1945).
6. Information from Mr. F. M. Underhill, F.S.A. Another of the pots contained animal bones, apparently deposited by rats in recent years, but the contents of the pot described seem to have been put there by human agency.

foundations of the 1607 gate-house at Aldgate during the excavations in 1967. It had been broken when the foundations of the later Post Office were laid, but an undisturbed portion remaining *in situ* showed that it had stood the right way up. Mortar adhered to the outside, but the inside was quite clean, suggesting that the pot was complete when built into the foundations⁷.

The second is a complete brown-glazed cooking-pot, with three feet and two handles, found under the foundations of the Wren Tower of St. Mary Aldermanbury during Professor Grimes' excavation of 1967-8. It was broken when found, and might therefore have been thrown away as useless when the foundations were laid. No other pottery or domestic refuse was found with it, however, and the completeness of the pot suggests that it received its damage after burial.

The third is a large brown-glazed storage jar with two handles, and the base pressed to form three rudimentary feet. It is complete and undamaged, and was found by a workman under the eastern end of St. Stephen's Church, Coleman Street. Although this is not a stratified find, and the pot could therefore have been deposited at any time, it is of a type common in London in the second half of the 17th century, and the most likely occasion of its burial is during the rebuilding of the church after the Great Fire. Like the other two pots, it is of purely domestic type.

We have, therefore, at least a hint of the possible use of pottery kitchen vessels as foundation deposits in 17th century London, although there is as yet no certainty that we are dealing with a definite custom. All that can be said is that there does seem to have been such a practice in parts of the Netherlands and Germany, where domestic pots are not infrequently found either built into the walls, or buried beneath the thresholds of houses—a popular place for protective charms⁸.

Whatever the significance of these London finds—and until more examples are found, it is possible to regard them as coincidental—there can be no doubt that we have a genuine case of a post-medieval building sacrifice, or a closely comparable superstitious practice, in the rather gruesome discovery made in 1961 in Lauderdale House, Highgate Hill. In a bricked-up recess near a first-floor fire-place were found four desiccated chickens, two of which had apparently been strangled and two buried alive. There were the remains of an egg, probably laid by one of the chickens during its imprisonment. Also in the recess were a yellow-

7. Guildhall Museum Excavation Register 1273.

8. A. G. de Bruyn, *Bauopfer in Häusern*, in *Die Kunde*, Jg. 4 (1936), pp. 152-3. See also *Country Life*, 16th May, 1968 p. 1294, for a pot found under the threshold of an early 17th century almshouse at Odiham, Hants.



The tripod pot found under the foundations of the Wren tower of St. Mary Aldermanbury, 1967-8.

(Photo: Guildhall Museum)

glazed earthenware candlestick, a glass goblet, two odd shoes, all of the late 16th or early 17th century, and a thong of plaited rushes, probably used by builders. There was also a large basket, which probably originally contained all these objects, but this was thrown away by the workmen who found it. The other finds are now in the London Museum.

Parallels for parts of this extraordinary assemblage can be found. Dr. Norman Davey has informed me that a mummified chicken was found, during restoration work in 1874, in the great chimney of the late 15th century Porch House at Devizes. There are also rather numerous instances of the discovery of old shoes, usually odd ones, concealed in or immediately adjacent to chimney breasts. Since the Lauderdale House find, I have made a note of any examples that have come to my attention, and now have six records from various parts of southern England: one each from Kent (near Canterbury), Hertfordshire (near Buntingford), Berkshire (Sonning), Hampshire (near Basingstoke), the Isle of Wight (Brading), and Dorset (Corfe Castle). There is little doubt that a systematic search of the records of local museums would reveal many more. In five cases the shoe, or its photograph, has been examined and dated by Mr. J. W. Waterer. They appear to range from the late-16th century to the second half of the 17th century only. Here then is a fairly wide-spread custom that seems to have been quite common for about a century, but of which no written record or

surviving tradition apparently remains—except perhaps the vague idea that old shoes are “lucky”. The Highgate find itself gives us the best clue. Lauderdale House was built in the late-16th century, and altered in the mid-17th century, but the shoes, goblet, and candlestick seem to be of the time of the original building, and the sling of rushwork, if it is indeed a builder’s appliance, might suggest that the builder himself was responsible. It is in fact an extraordinary survival in Elizabethan England of a building-sacrifice of remarkably primitive form. The taking of life was originally essential—hence the chickens; the goblet presumably contained wine or some other liquid offering; candles have often played an important part in ritual practices; the shoes, however, remain puzzling. The earliest building-sacrifices were, of course, human, and the substitution of the part for the whole, the garment for the wearer, is acceptable practice in magic. It is difficult to believe that such ideas were current in the neighbourhood of Elizabethan London, but customs connected with them, which had become meaningless, might have survived from much earlier times. So far, however, there is no evidence of old shoes being built into chimneys at any earlier date. The Highgate associations certainly appear to link the custom with that of building sacrifice, although in some other cases the shoes seem to have been deposited when alterations were made to the chimney rather than at the time of the original building.

It seems likely, however, that in post-medieval times there was a change in the purpose of such superstitious practices. The original idea had been positive—to bring good fortune to the building; the emphasis now was probably on the warding-off of evil, which might enter by the chimney or threshold. The extensive literature on the supernatural in the 16th and 17th centuries was almost entirely devoted to witchcraft and counter-witchcraft, and the development of the new sciences was accompanied by a revival of superstition in its most repulsive forms. Against the background of this obsession, the barbaric practices performed in a gentleman’s house at Highgate become a little easier to understand.

A custom directly connected with the witch phobia has proved to be quite common in London in the latter part of the 17th century. This was the preparation of a witch-bottle, almost invariably a stoneware bellarmine at this date, as an antidote to witchcraft. In it were placed the urine and sometimes the hair or nail-clippings of the supposed victim of witchcraft, together with “Nails, Pins, and such instruments as carry a shew of Torture with them”, as the ingredients are described by a late 17th century writer⁹. Sometimes the pins were stuck

9. Cotton Mather: *Late Memorable Providences* (London) 1691.

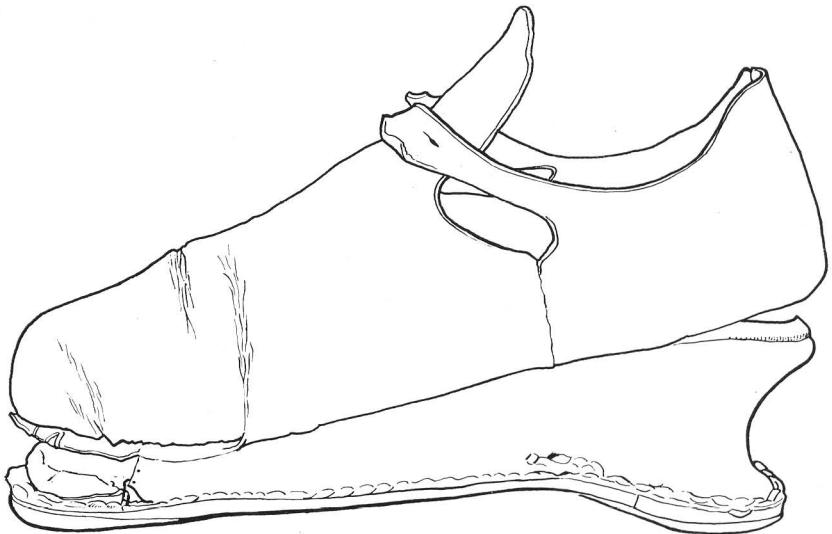
into a little heart-shaped piece of cloth or felt, probably cut from the garments of the person believed to be bewitched, as in a bellarmine witch-bottle from the bed of the old mill-stream under Great College Street, Westminster, and another from the Thames at Paul’s Pier Wharf. These circumstances have given rise to the erroneous idea that witch-bottles were used in malevolent magic by a sorcerer against an innocent victim. The methods of black magic are certainly used, but all the references to witch-bottles, both in 17th century books and in later folk-lore, make it quite clear that they were prepared as counter-measures *against* witchcraft by the supposed victim, or by a “wise man” acting on his behalf. It may be suspected, indeed, that the “white” witches were much more numerous and active than the “black” ones! The use of the urine and other personal leavings of the sufferer is explained by Joseph Blagrave in his account of a witch-bottle in *The Astrological Practice of Physic*, published in 1671. “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 poysitious matter into the body of man or beast, without some of the Witches blood mingled with it.” The witch, who may be unknown, is therefore attacked through the magical link of sympathy that she has established with her victim.

In later times, bottles of various kinds were used for this purpose, but in the second half of the 17th century—and no earlier examples are known—the container of the magical ingredients seems always to have been a bellarmine. There is little doubt that this was a case of “image magic”, and that the stoneware bottle, with its malevolent bearded face, became a magical symbol of the witch or wizard, who could be killed by its agency, with the consequent relief of the victim. The quicker way was to explode the bottle on a fire, but this was as difficult as it was hazardous, for the bottle had to burst before the cork blew out. It was believed to be equally effective, though slower, simply to bury or otherwise hide away the corked bottle¹⁰. In East Anglia, where the practice probably originated, it was usual to bury the bottle under the threshold or hearth, both traditional places for protective charms. In London, however, it was sometimes thrown into water—as in the case of the Westminster and Paul’s Pier Wharf examples, and another possible witch-bellarmine from Chelsea Reach, which contained only a bent iron nail, cinders from a fire and some unidentifiable fibrous fragments. Others—from Rathbone Place (Marylebone), Broad Street (Lambeth) and Roehampton—were probably deposited in ditches or buried in fields. Others again were

10. There is an amusing account of the failure of the first method and the success of the second in Joseph Glanvil’s *Sadducismus Triumphatus* 1681 pp. 205-8.

**Shoe found in a bricked-up recess
near a fire-place at Lauderdale
House, Highgate Hill, 1961.**

(Drawing: London Museum)



apparently buried in domestic premises, perhaps in gardens, at Pennington Street, Stepney, and on the site of the Alhambra on the eastern side of Leicester Square.

No trace of urine—apparently an essential ingredient—ever remains, though phosphates probably derived from it have been detected in East Anglian examples. The cork rarely survives, but did so in the Westminster bellarmine. The most conspicuous, and in many cases the only recognizable, contents, are the iron nails and brass pins, of which the latter are usually bent. These, with the victim's urine "and a little white salt", are in fact the only ingredients mentioned by the 17th century writers. In an extreme case, as in a bellarmine found in 1897 when excavating for the foundations of a theatre at Deptford, the only indication that it may have been used as a witch-bottle is the record that it contained an encrustation of iron rust. In three London examples, however, the pins were stuck into a recognisable cloth or felt heart; three contained traces of human hair; and two, human nail-parings. It may be suspected that some of these additional ingredients occurred in others, but were not observed. It is significant that the bellarmine from Pennington Street, Stepney, the contents of which were very carefully examined soon after it was found, had, in addition to iron nails and brass pins, both human hair and nail parings; moreover, although there was no recognizable cloth heart, as in the bellarmines from Westminster and Leicester Square, several of the pins were stuck into a much decayed fragment of cloth, which almost certainly originally formed part of one.

The purpose of this article has been to draw attention to finds that are possibly, probably, or

certainly indicative of superstitious practices. Their rating of probability is largely determined by the number of instances that are known. I suspect, for example, that two knives, probably of the 16th century, found built into a wall of Cade House, West Malling, Kent, may have been put there deliberately as a magical charm of some kind. This idea receives some support from the recent discovery of a knife-blade, probably of about the same date, found with a nail and a fragment of material, enclosed in the wattle and daub wall of an old house in Brentwood High Street, Essex¹¹. The possibility of a coincidental loss by accident cannot be ruled out in these two cases, but a third similar find would make it seem likely that such a custom did in fact exist. Further instances would clinch the matter, and might begin to throw some light on the distribution of a practice which must at present be regarded as purely hypothetical. It is therefore important that all such odd discoveries should be fully publicised.

Unfortunately, many archaeologists are curiously reluctant to show any interest in the less rational aspects of human behaviour, and finds of this nature are rarely publicised or discussed. It is not clear whether this is due to a modern superstition, contradicted by history, that man is a rational animal; or to the revival of an ancient one, that there is a risk of contagion in such studies, leading, if not to possession by the powers of darkness, at least to a collapse of scientific scepticism! It was reported, for example, that some of the younger archaeologists working at South Cadbury "strongly resisted" the idea—since published by the Director in his Sum-

11. In the Passmore Edwards Museum, Newham

mary Report¹²—that certain skulls of oxen and horses, found in a series of pits, were deliberately laid there as ritual deposits. The same attitude is reflected by a question in the Archaeological and Anthropological Tripos this summer:

"It has been said that religion is the last resort of the puzzled archaeologist. Do you agree¹³?"?

The right answer is surely that it should not be, and that the archaeologist must also take account of *superstition*, the tattered survival of a discredited religion. For both are facts of history, and like all other human activities have left their marks on the archaeological record. These can be studied as objectively as any other archaeological phenomena. They are not less interesting than the evidence for practical details of life and technology, and may throw much more light on the mental attitudes of the past. Finally, any evidence is disregarded at our peril, and failure to recognize that belief in the supernatural has always been a factor in human behaviour may lead to some odd errors. It may be

12. *Anti J.* 49 (1969) pt. 1, 36.

13. Quoted in *Antiquity*, Sept. 1969, p.172.

appropriate to conclude with an example of this, which arose from a misinterpretation outside our area, but has caused a considerable amount of confusion in London archaeology. Steeple-shaped glass apothecaries' bottles are now known to be characteristic of the 18th century, but were long regarded as late medieval, because one was found under the foundations of a Leicestershire church built about 1400. Several others have been found in similar circumstances, and it was suggested as long ago as 1876 that they were buried under the church walls in much more recent times as a variant of the witch-bottle charm¹⁴. This view was almost certainly correct, but in the 20th century it seemed easier to believe that these tapering bottles showed in their "Gothic" lines affinities with late medieval architecture, than that human beings should burrow so senselessly to the bottom of an old wall! This mis-judgment gave rise to an incorrect theory of the evolution of apothecaries' phials, which, as a result, were dated much too early all along the line¹⁵.

14. *Archaeologia* 46 (1) 133-4 and footnote.

15. See W. A. Thorpe, *English Glass* (1949) 86-6.

Specialist equipment available in the London area:

Surrey Archaeological Society

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Contact

Felix Holling, Castle Arch, Guildford Surrey.

Amendments to List in the London Archaeologist No. 1

London and Middlesex Archaeological Society

- As Upper Ground is closing down all the equipment stored there will have to be moved elsewhere; so far a new home has not been found.
- The Proton Magnetometer is now kept at London Museum.
- Enquiries should now be addressed to Roy Canham, Field Officer, London Museum, Kensington Palace, tel. WES 9816.

Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Society

- As Upper Ground is closing down, all the equipment stored there will have to be moved elsewhere.

The above mentioned articles of equipment are available for loan to local societies and other similar organisations in the London region on the following general conditions.

- They are only available for loan when not required by owner society.
- Transport of the equipment in both directions is the responsibility of the borrower.
- All damage sustained by the equipment other than fair wear and tear must be recompensed by the borrower.
- Locations quoted are only the usual ones for the equipment but borrowers may have to collect from other places.
- Additional conditions may be made.

If any other society has items of specialised equipment which they would be willing to loan out, would they please contact the Editor with the details.