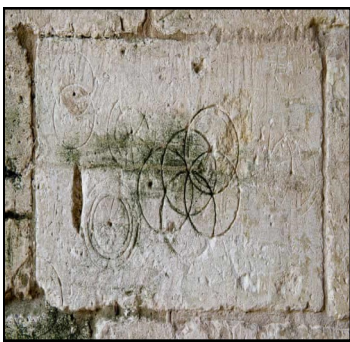


Witchcraft and Witch Bottles

From ancient times people had accepted or believed in the existence of magic. It was only during about the 15th century and the rise of Protestantism that witchcraft began to be regarded as dangerous. By the 16th and 17th centuries, fear had increased to become panic: hysteria became widespread, as it was believed that witch's powers were invisible and could travel through the air. People felt they and their homes were at great risk from evil penetrating inside, but they also believed that certain objects, plants, minerals, and shapes had the ability to repel a witch's powers. They were therefore used for protection in a variety of ways. Hundreds of years later, evidence of some of these can be seen today.



Tithe Barn, Bradford-on-Avon, Wilts.

Photo: Peter Williams/PA

Special marks, known as apotropaic marks, were carved, or burned in wood, stone, and plaster, particularly near openings, as chimneys, doorways and windows which were thought to be most vulnerable. (Though very faint, they can often still be seen.)

Certain plants like Rowan, Rosemary and Fennel were deliberately planted near doorways, and pieces of iron were placed under doorsteps. Personal objects, particularly shoes and items of clothing, as

well as animal bones and horseshoes were concealed usually near hearths. All to keep evil witches out. People further protected themselves by wearing, or carrying protective amulets, or charms, of stones, bones, animal parts and iron.



17th century ritual protection marks in the attics above the royal bedroom at Knole House photo Helen Barrett NT

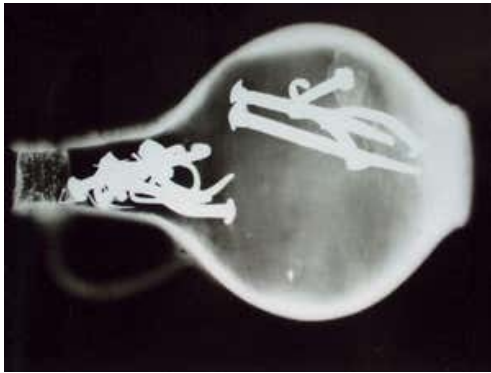
Without today's medical and scientific knowledge, there was little understanding of disease. So, during that period, people believed that all illness or ill fortune was a result of witchcraft. They sought help from healers, known as 'cunning folk,' (those thought to have ancient knowledge and were believed to do good, even though it was illegal). 'Bewitchment' was a frequently given as a diagnosis.



Contents of Greenwich witch bottle bent nails and human hair

Photo Dr Alan Massey

As a cure, the 'victim' would be instructed to put a concoction, often including the 'victim's' urine and some iron in a jug and to heat or bury it. Using the Law of Contagion in 'Sympathetic Magic,' 'like responds to like,' so a person could affect another at a distance by using their own hair / urine etc. Written accounts of such practices state the belief that the spell could be reversed and reflected back on the originator. Enclosing the victim's urine along with sharp objects, nail parings bent pins or nails, would torment, and make the witch suffer so much that they'd be forced to remove the spell. The inclusion of nail parings and other sharp objects e.g., nails and pins, were to scratch and wound the witch.



*Contents of Greenwich witch bottle
bent nails and human hair
Photo Dr Alan Massey*

Many of these 'witch bottles' as they are commonly known, have been found in England, and it was clear they had been deliberately hidden or buried. Historians have agreed that their concealment, and strange contents, was linked to witchcraft superstition. Their locations, along with analyses of their contents, have been carefully recorded. Research showed a variety of contents, for example: pieces of cloth / leather, fibre, rope, thread, thorns and iron pins and nails, along with human urine, locks of hair, eyelashes, fingernail cuttings and blood. However, they each seemed to have a basic mixture of human fragments and sharp, often iron, objects.

Since 1885, 150 particularly distinctive, bulbous shaped stoneware bottles, have been recorded. 17 of them have been found in Kent, with 9 in the Ashford area and of these, 3 are from Charing (one in the Old House, two in Sherbourne House), 2 are from Bethersden and 1 from Pluckley. This specific style of container was originally made in Germany in the 15th century, and were known there as 'Bartmann Kruggs' (Bearded Man Jugs). A face was skilfully depicted on them and, together with their fat shape, were thought to be a representation of prosperity and good fortune. They were made in different sizes and traditionally used for serving and storing beer, wine and oil. The jugs became very popular



*Bellarmino photo Wiki commons
Malcolm Lidbury*

and were exported to various parts of the world between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. (By about 1560 thousands had been imported to England and were later made here.)

During the 16th and 17th centuries, these jugs increased in popularity and the engraved face became more stylised and gradually more crudely etched and uglier. In English they were derisively named 'Bellarmine jugs,' as the unpleasant face, together with the round, fat shape, bore a similarity to the satirical depiction of a very unpopular man: Cardinal Bellarmino. He had vociferously criticised Protestantism, and had been angrily denounced by King James I, becoming generally mocked and hated. The crude face on the jugs is also thought to be similar to representations of the 'Wild Man' of medieval folklore.



*Bellarmino faces:
16th- 17th- 17th-century
Photos: Jason Sandy.*



Collection of Bellarmine jugs.

Photo: Alex Wright

Stoneware Bellarmine jug witch bottles have been found frequently, perhaps because at the time they were commonplace, and they have also proved to be very durable to survive the intervening centuries. It has been suggested that they may have been deliberately chosen because their very ugliness seemed appropriate for their purpose. Further, the shape of the neck and the bulbous body, of the Bellarmine, was seen as a representation of the witch's bladder, and so gave strength to the magic. Sealing urine and sharp pins inside the jug, would mean that the witch's pain would intensify every time they passed water. Later witch bottles were made of glass.

For nearly 200 years in England witchcraft was a crime punishable by death. The number of trials and prosecutions declined from about 1650, the hysteria calmed and 'The Witchcraft Act' of 1735 formally abolished the hunting and executions of witches in Great Britain.

There is discussion among historians about the reasons for the change in thinking and beliefs, though there is broad agreement that the decline of 'witchcraft mania' is complicated. Scientific discoveries undermined the previous certainty that witchcraft was the basis of all ills. Reason and greater understanding of the natural world began to replace long held superstitions. Health and communications improved, as well as greater access to education. All played a part in the reduction and practice of counter-magic.

Centuries later, with greater information and knowledge, most people would not think of witchcraft as the basis for any problems they encounter. Though they might just 'touch wood,' keep 'good luck' charms, avoid stepping under ladders and take particular care with mirrors

Valerie Yeeles



Pendle Witches 1612

Illustration by John Gilbert from the 1854 edition of William Harrison Ainsworth's The Lancashire Witches.

Two of the accused witches: Anne Whittle (Chattox) and her daughter Anne Redferne.

Main sources: www.ncbi A Thwaite , Denny Robbins, www.academia.edu, archaeology.co.uk, www.newscientist.com, Suffolk institute, blackthornandstone.com, warwick.ac.uk, historic England, Horniman Museum,