

Fires

A blazing fire in a hearth today usually gives joy and draws us towards it. But when larger hearths were used for cooking, there was a considerable danger of fire breaking out in the chimney, or even of accidental death.

Once the medieval open hearth was enclosed within a chimney, the fire and space around it became more focused. Accidents occurred because of the combination of bulky clothes, long sleeves and heated fat. Numerous records from coroners' courts in the 17th and 18th centuries contain details of accidental deaths after people had fallen into the kitchen fire.

Cooking pots were either suspended from a horizontal bar or hung on large hooks against the back wall above the hearth. These gathered carbonised accretions; fire could accidentally ignite these crusty deposits and set light to the internal walls of the throat. Once the flames reached the exit above the roof, the thatch and the house would be vulnerable.

In his diary for March 1705, William Coe wrote that his Suffolk house nearly caught alight through a cooking accident: "My house escaped burning by a boylor of fatt hanging over the fire and was forgot, but my wife happily saw it just before it boyled over."

Although we understand the logical explanation for such accidental fires today, people in the past could look at such misfortunes with suspicion and blame it on witchcraft. Even as late as 1910, a 14-year-old boy in Cornwall recalled: "It is the old custom to keep a small fragment of last year's [Yule] log to light that of next year. If this was not done, the old folk thought that their old house would catch fire. Of course, I do not believe in this ... but one year ... the fragment was accidentally burnt. Rather strangely, our chimney caught fire the same year."

There was a tradition around Christmas time of bringing in a very large log, which was kept burning until Twelfth Night. The Yule Log was brought into the home to ward off evil spirits and as a protection against fire.

BURNING issues

For more than 20 years **Timothy Easton** has been investigating and recording evidence of protective markings, symbols and patterns in old buildings. As midwinter approaches, what better time to gather round the hearth?

Robert Herrick, the early 17th-century poet, refers to this as the "Christmas brand". In his poem from *Hesperides* (1647), "Ceremonies for Candlemasse Day," he says a remnant of the extinguished log is to be kept until Christmas the following year, when the next Christmas brand is to be lit using the old one. "And where 'tis safely kept, the Fiend/ Can do no mischief there." The belief that the house was vulnerable to a fiend, or to some wickedness often associated with malevolent witches, was particularly strong during the 17th and 18th centuries. At this time cooking hearths were still large affairs.

Robert Herrick refers to a fiend, and many people believed that a witch could enter the house in the form of a familiar. The familiar was

supposed to be nurtured by the witch and could then act on her or his behalf. In 1603, during the first year of his kingship in England, King James I republished his small book *Daemonologie*, to enforce his belief about the truth of witchcraft. An extract from this reads: "being transformed into the likeness of a little beast or fowl, they will come and pierce through whatsoever house or church, though all ordinary passages be closed, by whatsoever open[ing] the air may enter in at."

The hearth was always open to the top of the roof and sky, so it is easy to see why accidental fire could be attributed to a malevolent spirit or a witch. This explains why archaeological evidence of attempts to ward off fire can be observed both on the hearth beam and in material hidden around

Right

A flame burn on the mantle beam of an upper chamber from Great Barton, Suffolk.

This lintel is not a reused timber and the flame mark must have been applied before construction, probably by the carpenter.





Young witch being instructed in raising fires on buildings, Swarbia, 1533. Woodcut for the *Compendium Maleficarum* by Francesco Maria Guazzo, Milan, 1608



Above The underside of a partly burnt log found in a spiritual midden at Hestley Hall, Suffolk, early 18th century. This was used as a mount for a chicken (see next page).

Left Half of a small, sawn 18th-century log split into three. The ends were put to the fire, extinguished and then consigned to the cavity beside an upper fireplace at Hestley Hall, Suffolk. Here they are reassembled with an elastic band.

the chimney. When the finishing lath and plaster walls enclosed the upper parts of the brickwork, it was not usual to close off the top part as this was high up in the building or above ceiling level. Many broken or worn-out household or agricultural objects, clothing and shoes in particular, were dropped down from this point. Instead of consigning these to the fire or burying them, householders climbed up two flights of stairs to add the artefacts to these spiritual middens.

The intention would seem to be to add to a dead-end space and lure the feared familiars into a trap. Some of the objects can be fairly accurately dated, particularly shoes and clay-pipe bowls. There can be considerable numbers of these and by examining their relative position in the stratified layers that build up, it is possible to date the process. A range of up to 100 years is not uncommon, and there can be as many as 500 objects in each spiritual midden.

The detailed analysis of four spiritual middens from Suffolk is given in a forthcoming paper for an American archaeological journal. This has revealed some surprising material and conclusions. Large quantities of discarded wood are present amongst the three earliest examples from the 17th and 18th centuries; the fourth is from the mid-19th century. Some of these are from old furniture, mouldings and the staves and lids (heads) of caskets, but there is much smaller hedgerow timber, suitable for kindling, and middle-sized logs. It is noticeable that several of these have been partially burnt in the hearth, extinguished and then consigned to the void. Why do this when the twigs and brands would be ideal for starting another fire?

These burnt offerings seem to relate to the evidence of deliberate burn marks that appear on wall studs and other timber components within the house that were considered to be vulnerable areas.



Above A centrally placed flame burn over a principal door entrance, in the 18th-century outer walls of the Saxon Church at Viscri, Transylvania. This entrance gave access to the school rooms in the 19th century. The detail shows vertical cuts through the centre of the mark.

These marks were made by holding a lighted candle or rushlight against the timber, creating characteristic flame marks; many of these must have been made by the carpenters at the time of construction. These have long been assumed to be caused by accidentally allowing the light to burn down too close to the timber to which they are attached. However, the angles of some examples make this explanation impossible.

Scribed letter-forms can be observed on many hearth beams, made by the carpenters on freshly cut timber with a rase knife. Flame touch marks can be found integrated amongst these apotropaic (evil averting) letters. In certain cases the number of burn marks matches the distribution and strength of the scribed symbols.

A good example comes from a house in Anstruther, Scotland. In the central section the flame marks have partially burnt sections missing from the prominent M and integrated AM. These letters are the most common form of apotropaic marks, apart from the hexafoil, found throughout Britain, and originally derived from ciphers associated with the Virgin Mary.

Also consistent with many other marked hearth beams are the lighter cut-marks made either with a knife, a scribing tool, or the point of dividers; these are often coeval with the rase-knife marks. It is clear that one of these, forming a lighter-made M, has been scribed over a flame mark (circled below), possibly enforcing the desire for protection against fire. This is repeated in other situations, such as on the wall stud at the head of a stair with multiple flame marks on both sides of this timber, in an Essex house. Here the burn mark, made with a rush light, has also been marked with an M form on its side. Scribed Ms are often seen on doors, presented on their sides, because the plank was marked along on its edge before assembly.

Recent practical research by two independent scholars has demonstrated that to make a deep



burn requires the surface to be scraped away at a point where a carbonised crust begins to form. Many examples show this intervention using a sharp point, so such scratchings should not be confused with the scribed symbols.

Although the majority of multiple burn marks occur around the hearth beam, they are also found in roof spaces, stairs, widows and doors. The single, centrally placed example on the lintel of a main external at Viscri (see illustration left) door makes its protective purpose clear. This burn has also been cut back in the centre. This example was discovered in Transylvania, showing they can be found around Europe.

It seems that this obsession was akin to an inoculation against disease: if you touch wood with flame, fire will be averted. Perhaps the burnt-wood offerings serve the same purpose.

Desiccated bodies of cats, chickens and geese are also found in the spiritual middens. These may have had a role either in entrapment or raising the alarm. At the bottom of a spiritual midden from Hestley Hall, Suffolk, a chicken was strategically placed on a partly burnt brand. The bird was found affixed to the wood with a generous lump of dung.

The consequences of fire could devastate people's homes, their outbuildings, animals and their livelihood. In parts of England sections of burnt yule log were placed on the animals' stalls to protect the cows "from harm or disaster".

Many people blamed malevolent forces for accidental fires. Several illustrations show witches and devils igniting fires: these prints must have enforced the belief of malicious intervention. Lightning and thunderstorms were also believed to be the work of supernatural powers; ringing the church bells was thought to placate uncontrolled forces. Items like belemnites, referred to as "thunder stones", and the secretion of shoes in the thatch were also thought to prevent house fires.

Destruction caused by ball lightning, although



Left The engraving that accompanied the 1656 pamphlet about the great storm and lightning strike at Widecombe-in-the-Moor, Devon, showing the strike on the tower, the collapse of the pinnacle through the roof and the fireball descending and entering the nave. This engraving was made 18 years after the disaster, which took place on Sunday October 21, 1638.

rare, was attributed to higher powers. Perhaps the most famous case took place at Widecombe-in-the-Moor Church, Devon, on Sunday October 21, 1638. During the service the church tower was badly damaged by a lightning strike, causing a pinnacle to fall through the roof. A thunderbolt entered the church, injuring about 60 people and killing two of the congregation. Initially this was viewed as being by God's hand, but in a pamphlet 18 years later certain godly people suggested it was a punishment because the building still

possessed a tall steeple together with its bells. This was all too reminiscent of the Popish religion for which it was built.

The illustration published with the pamphlet of 1656 shows the devastation made by the thunderbolt and lightning. Ball lightning was associated with dark forces because when it enters a building it tends to split, causing devastation, scorching walls and woodwork, and as it dies away it leaves behind a foul sulphurous smell reminiscent of hell. ○



PHOTOS: ANDY SHERNIF



Left A detail from the central section of a scribed lintel from Anstruther, Scotland. The flame burnt marks are as dominant as the symbols. Parts of both the M and the integrated AM, have been partially burnt through, despite the depth of the rase-knife marks. However, the burn that is sited between the two symbols has been carefully scored across afterwards with an M (circled).



Above left and right A small partly burnt log, with a mounted chicken secured with dung, from the spiritual midden at Hestley Hall, early 18th century. When first recovered the chicken was firmly attached to the brand; the central indented line in the detail of the dung was made by the breastbone. (See images on previous page.)