



**I**t was in 1990 that I first recorded a newly-uncovered ancient ceiling covered in signs and symbols made centuries ago by candle flame. The ceiling was revealed in a good-quality house at Woolpit, Suffolk, which dated from the 16th century and had been updated in the 17th century. Since that find, I have recorded 16 ceilings that had layers of paper or distemper removed to reveal remarkable candle-marked surfaces.

There are considerable variations between the sets of marks, probably indicating, I believe, that different “specialists” of some kind had been brought in to carry out this work. However, several patterns and motifs recur on some of the ceilings, often located many miles apart – implying, I suggest, a shared knowledge of the importance of certain symbols as offering protection

against some kind of danger from witchcraft.

The candle marks are very old indeed. From written evidence associated with a full name written out on one ceiling, at Great Barton in Suffolk, it is highly likely that the marks were made during the second half of the 17th century.

The process of making, and then, centuries later, finding these marks is fascinating. Many years after the person with specialist knowledge has been called in to execute the layout of marks, and worked his or her candle over an unpainted ceiling, thick, successive layers of distemper or paper were applied.

Though washed and then hidden by fresh coats of distemper over generations, the marks remained reasonably intact because they were part wax and carbon-bonded into the plaster. Once, there must have been many more examples, some marked over a layer of distemper, which would not have survived washing.

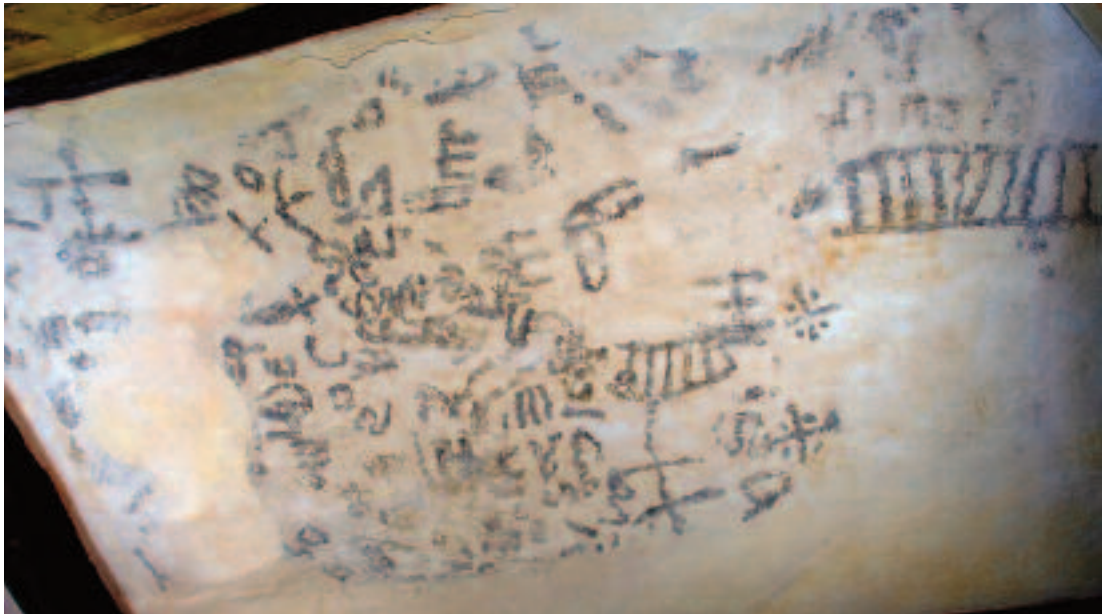
Above, this view of the attic at an ancient manor house in Essex called Braddoaks shows that the marks on the main horizontal ceiling continue down the sloping plaster either side of the purlin. The absence of marks on the slope to the left of the principal rafter indicates that this is replacement plaster. It is opposite the position of a former dormer window. It is possible that a bed was placed here, in the same place as you see today, and the proximity to the former opening may have been a concern to the occupant. This is in a chamber with a fireplace that was written about in Easter 1594 by the recusant priest, Father Gerard. The hearth contains one of the two hiding places in the house that Gerard recalls in his memoirs, where he hid for four days to avoid capture

Facing page (left), an Inigo Jones drawing of a reveller playing a kitchen gridiron with a shoe horn, first half of 17th century. The gridiron motif appears in much art of the time, and can be interpreted as a symbol of feasting and celebration

Facing page (right), the surviving half ceiling at Woolpit shows a concentration of marks in the central area and an absence of symbols in the bottom right corner. This corner is next to two outer walls. This is the ‘quiet zone’ where perhaps an image or text has been secured. The prominent symbols are the two ladders, two old-style cross forms, enlarged letter ‘I’ with central horizontal bar, and two ‘sausage-like’ linked forms that are comparable to the ‘propeller-like’ design at Great Barton, see page 58

# Candle powers

They are some of the most puzzling, ethereal relics of a building's distant past to have come to light in recent years – motifs, words, letters and symbols 'drawn' on ceilings with carbon from a candle flame. For more than 20 years, **Timothy Easton** has been recording examples and attempting to decipher their meaning. Be they folk magic signs, religious devotionals, good luck charms, tokens of revelry and celebration, or all of these – their secret endures



It is an intriguing possibility that later occupants of houses which had long since been decorated with these kind of marks were assured that they had been made for good protective reasons, and were happy to repair and retain these marked ceilings. This is the case through to the modern period. To date, only one house owner I talked to was unconvinced by my explanation of the power of the candle marks, and replaced the old ceiling. There are other examples, now lost, that I have seen only in historic photographs, or that have been reported to me after I have given a lecture on the subject.

So far I have found nine marked ceilings in Suffolk, two in Norfolk, three in Essex, one in Kent, and another in Derbyshire. There is one other I have photographed in the eastern United States, which may have been made for similar purposes. I would like to hear of others.

It is striking that the specialist who made these symbols concentrated his or her efforts on

certain areas of a ceiling. One often sees a mass of marks in a central zone, and a thinning out (or complete absence) of marks in other areas, usually near some of the outer edges. If a large room covered with such marks has subsequently been subdivided, it may at first be difficult to appreciate the overall picture.

It is rare to see evidence of candle marking in a ground floor room. Only one house, Ulveston Hall, near Debenham in Suffolk, had the representation of a gridiron next to a large M or W on the hall ceiling, although there are many symbols scattered over a wide area of the hall chamber ceiling above.

The great majority of candle marks are found either in principal bedrooms on the first floor, or in attics. Often, the name of the house where these are found ends in Hall – denoting a gentry house or former manor house. This may indicate either that the expert candle markers expected to be paid well, or that they would

only do such work for a certain class of clients.

The Woolpit half-ceiling is lacking marks in one corner of the room. Next to this near-rectilinear patch are two ladder-like symbols and two early forms of Christian crosses, with dots in the intersecting angles. Clearly, something is likely to have been stuck to the blank area which these four carefully placed symbols honoured: some form of text or image is very possible. Since this layout was almost certainly executed in the 17th century, this is perhaps less likely to be a Catholic image. There were printed texts and approved Godly images available to Protestants to put up in their houses for spiritual reflection.

Symbolic ladders have often been used as a metaphor for ascending to higher realms and, together with the crosses, they could well have directed the mind towards what was once in the now empty area of the ceiling, perhaps a picture or a passage from the Bible.

Another feature of many marked ceilings is the multitude of letters of the alphabet scattered about. In a few of them one can make out a complete name. At Great Barton, near Bury St Edmunds, is a good gentry house which has a mostly complete marked ceiling over the kitchen chamber, which contains a full name. During the 17th century such a room was often favoured as a principal bedroom by the head of the household because of the warmth rising up from the kitchen hearth below. Not only is the greater part of this ceiling marked out heavily and with many letters and symbols, but there is also a paucity of marks along two edges of the room. Near one of these empty zones is the route down to the kitchen via stairs, and here there is another mass of symbols drawn out over the sloping ceiling in the stairwell.

**T**he name that appears several times in the Great Barton house is “Sarah Sugate”. Sugate is the name of the family who were living in this house in the second half of the 17th century. The owners, who settled in the village in the 1650s, were Robert and Mary Sugate. One of their children was Sarah. But what had happened to her to cause anxiety in this room we can only guess at.

Sarah left the house in the later 1660s to live an apparently contented, married life, so parental grief was not the reason. One possibility for her name being used so prominently on markings might be that Sarah was given to sleep walking. She may either have slept in this room with her parents, or perhaps wandered through it to go downstairs in the night: this could explain the plethora of marks over the stair ceiling. In the 17th century, sleepwalkers were often thought to be possessed. Could this perhaps be the reason why an experienced “cunning” man or woman was called upon to work their magic over this ceiling?

Another feature on the main ceiling at Great Barton, in common with Ulveston Hall, is the multitude of gridirons that have been depicted. There may be a clue here that can be picked up in Continental prints and paintings which show why this commonplace kitchen utensil was depicted.

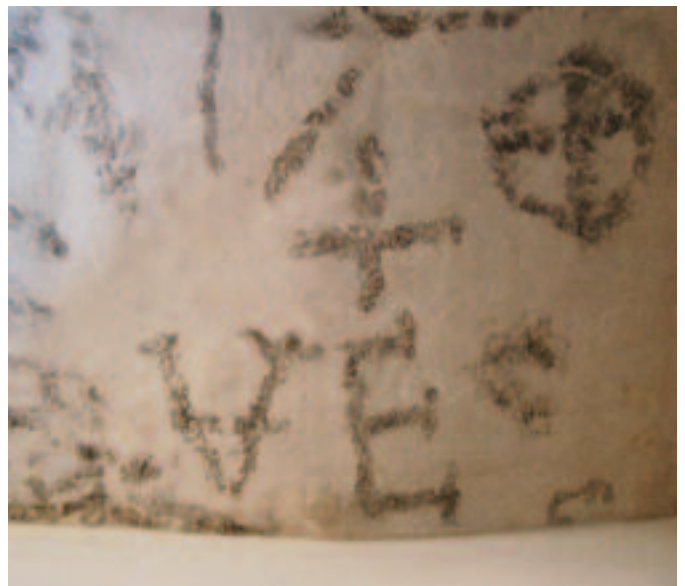
There is one time in the year when the gridiron is used on the Continent in a context other than for cooking. This is during party celebrations held on Twelfth Night or during

**‘THE NAME THAT APPEARS SEVERAL TIMES IN THE GREAT BARTON HOUSE IS SARAH SUGATE. SUGATE IS THE NAME OF THE FAMILY LIVING IN THE HOUSE IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 17TH CENTURY... ONE POSSIBILITY IS THAT SARAH WAS GIVEN TO SLEEP WALKING. IN THE 17TH CENTURY SLEEP WALKERS WERE OFTEN THOUGHT TO BE POSSESSED’**

From top, the mass of marks over the stair to the kitchen at the Great Barton house, in Suffolk, make the symbols in this area difficult to distinguish. The letter ‘R’, written twice with one reversed, are the clearest

Two gridirons and a ‘propeller-like’ motif can be seen in one corner of what is now a shower space at Great Barton. The same two ‘blades’ can be seen at Woolpit, near ladders and crosses. To the left of the ‘propeller’ is the name Sarah (see overleaf for another detail of her name in the same room)

Two crosses from Great Barton, one enclosed in a circle, occur at Woolpit and other houses



# candle powers



Left (top), an old-style cross with four dots in the intersections, here at Woolpit, is replicated on other ceilings and occurs in prehistoric and early contexts as well;



Left (below), Jan Steen's painting 'Twelfth Night', 1660s, features the gridiron player as a key figure in revelry and celebration. The gridiron motif found portrayed in candle marks indicates a time of year when this clashing symbol would be used to banish evil. In Steen's evocations of Twelfth Night, it is often the oldest or youngest person who is chosen to be the 'Bean King', and in this painting it is the youngest child, wearing a paper crown, who has been selected

Carnival, which is the period of feasting to use up certain foods and generally let off steam before the abstinence of Lent. This tradition, mainly associated with Catholics, was depicted by the Dutch painter Jan Steen and others in the 17th century. There are several paintings by Steen showing family celebrations in which a form of rhythmic, rough music is being performed using various instruments: the gridiron, rummel pot, and clattering spoons or bones are alternately shown with hurdy-gurdy and violin.

This celebratory domestic "music" was not meant to make a pretty sound, but was intended to drive off spirits and witches and to keep the

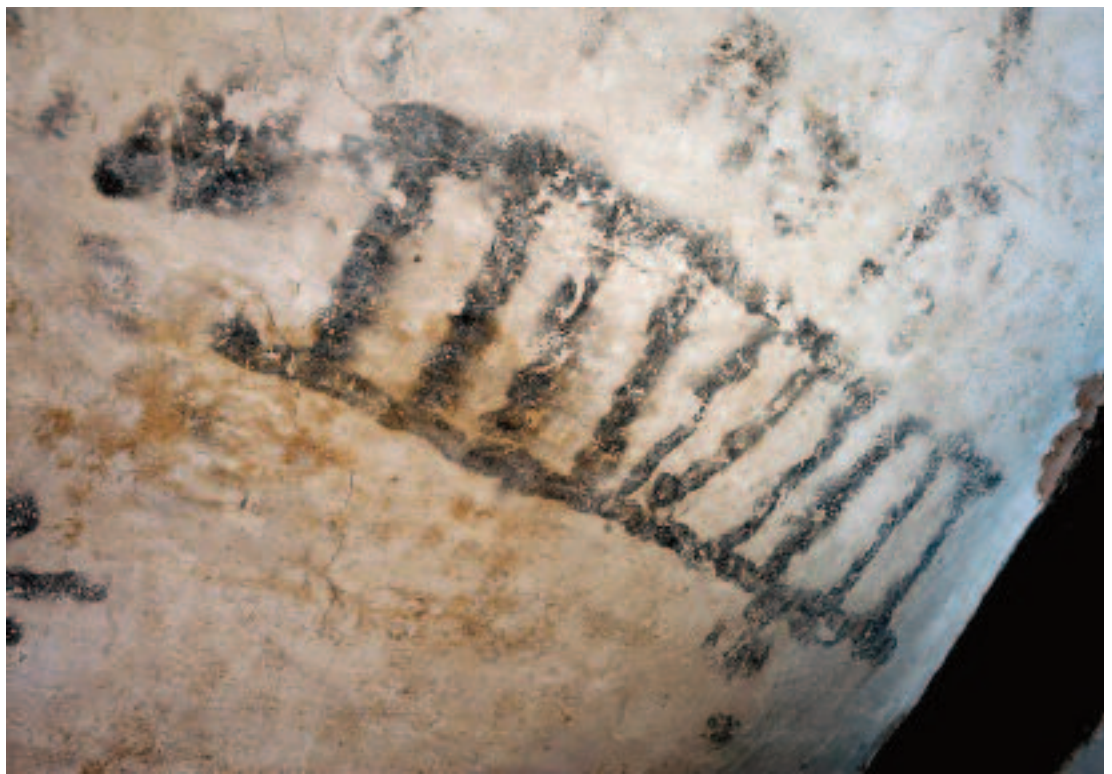
family safe for the next year. There is surviving poetry and literature that recalls this celebration and the ritual cleansing of the house, particularly during the traditional crowning of the Bean King during the feast. Whoever was chosen by lot was raised aloft and marked the ceiling with crosses to protect the household. Samuel Pepys writes about various drunken family celebrations that he held at home or attended on Twelfth Night.

During Carnival, the same instruments, particularly the gridiron and rummel pot, could be brought out to chase away evil spirits. Pieter Breughel's painting "The Battle between Carnival and Lent" shows the maskers and

music-makers in the foreground accompanying the metaphorical charge of the corpulent figure of Gluttony, lance in hand, being pushed towards the emaciated figure of Lent.

It could be that around this time of year it was seen as propitious in these English houses to have such symbols added to protect the household from misfortune. This is still done in many European countries, where crosses or the Magi's initials are added above doorways to keep the house safe from harmful spirits for the following year. However, it may simply have been that the clashing iron instrument, intended to drive out malevolent spirits, was represented at Great Barton many times over such a ceiling,

# candle powers



because of their concern for their daughter, Sarah. Such a large number of gridirons depicted in one place is very unusual.

I believe that the reason why most of these marked ceilings appear to be in bedrooms seems to be that their commissioning is likely to be sleep-related. In the mind of people living through the most intensive period of witch-hunting, during the 17th and first half of the 18th centuries, any noise in walls or ceilings above the bedrooms might have been interpreted as a witch's "familiar" which had entered the house. Plenty of corresponding archaeological evidence exists to show that during the dark months of winter, upper areas of a house which were not visited so frequently and could be poorly lit, such as attic stairs, were "protected" by a variety of ritualised methods.

Some of the candle-mark symbols are clear enough to see that terminal dots have been added to the extremities of lines, squiggles, U-shaped signs and crosses. A few of these bear comparison to the secret codes collected by the early 16th-century German magician and occult writer, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. His secret scripts were republished during the 17th century, and some of the symbols made by candles, or possibly tapers, were again reinterpreted by painters, perhaps offering an extra service with their decorative schemes.

I am hoping that many more instances will come to light, perhaps in other counties, not least because each additional example helps to confirm links between the frequently occurring marks, and extends our knowledge of forms of symbols that are otherwise unrecorded. Perhaps members of the SPAB would like to tell me about any marked ceilings they may know of.

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Above, the 'ladder' motif found at Woolpit in Suffolk might indicate the rising of the spirit to a higher plane; right, 'Sarah', Sarah Sugate, who lived in the house in the 1660s. This ceiling features several renditions of her name; below, the main part of the horizontal ceiling at Braddoaks contains a prominent W, an I with a horizontal bar, and at the top of the photograph a 'Tau' cross T-form flanked by two reverse S forms. Elsewhere there are remnants of what appear to be written words

