

Heritage Hound News

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Edition 3

The “Heritage Hound” is brought to you by Dominic Romeo Historic Property.

Australia's only Real Estate Agency dedicated to selling Heritage and Historic Property.



I must apologise to all my Heritage Hounds for the late posting of the August Newsletter.

Since leaving Circa Heritage and Lifestyle and transitioning into my own heritage property brand, I have been busy appraising amazing historic houses across Tasmania and the Western District of Victoria and listing and selling in between. On top of that, our book agent met with a leading publisher, interested in another possible book deal with us, so Marie and I are working on this – but more about that later.

The topic I have chosen for this month’s newsletter is highly fascinating and perhaps a topic not widely known amongst heritage enthusiasts. It has taken me some time to put together as it involved research, field work, and questioning the authenticity of an exciting find.!

Enjoy the read.



DOMINIC ROMEO.

HISTORIC PROPERTY

DOMINIC ROMEO | Heritage Specialist
+61 438 500 277

dominicromeo@historicproperty.com.au

HISTORICPROPERTY.COM.AU

2, 33b Brantome Street, GISBORNE

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The Magic World of Apotropaic Marks in Colonial Australia.

Protecting a home from evil is a very ancient practice, and evidence for rituals, whether via a spell or some other form of magic, has been identified in buildings across the world for centuries.

Liminal zones or thresholds were seen as vulnerable to attack by evil spirits and therefore, hearths, windows, hallways, and doors required special treatment. Chimneys and fireplaces were also focal points for clusters of protective marks as they were believed to be entry points for witches. These spaces are areas that often evoked feelings of eeriness and were thought to have provided a passage for spirits to enter.

Ritual protective marks have only recently received attention. One of the first papers on the subject appeared in 1999 when Tim Easton published his notes on marks he identified inside timber buildings dating from the period 1550-1750. In 2016, Historic England asked the public to help them record new examples of protective markings across the UK. This appeal produced 600 responses, 100 of which came from parts of Scotland and Wales. The highly successful appeal demonstrated how widespread these marks actually are. The highest number (150) was reported from the Eastern Counties, where an earlier survey of 64,000 inscriptions in 800 parish churches had revealed that some 20 per cent have a ritual protection function.

Ritual protective marks or witches' marks are properly known as apotropaic marks, from the Greek word meaning "to turn away" or "to ward off". It derives from the prefix apo "away" and the verb trepein "to turn", therefore something apotropaic is intended to avert evil, bad luck, or harm.

Several years ago, I was admiring an old stable built in the 1830s in Southern Tasmania. As I looked at the craftsmanship, I noticed burn marks on the upright stall posts, and the more I investigated, the more I noticed burn marks throughout the building. This led me to enquire and research the meaning of these markings. I was amazed to discover that it is a relatively new and a little-known subject, with Dr. Ian Evans being the authority on the subject.

On a personal experience into the world of protective marks, approximately 3 years ago, we purchased a very run-down mid-century house which had not been lived in for many years, but what I noticed was that under every door there were soot or burn marks made from a candle (Illustration 1&2). At the time, I asked the vendor about the burn marks. The vendor informed me that it was a Greek tradition and made from a burning candle. She stated that the marks protected the occupants of the house and were intended to ward off evil spirits.

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Illustration 1



Illustration 2

Over the past two years, I have become increasingly interested in learning and reading about these markings or symbols known as apotropaic marks. In fact, whenever I appraise a historic property in country Tasmania and Victoria, I can't help myself from being drawn to searching for these magic symbols.

Dr Ian Evans (Author, Publisher and Historian), has undertaken extensive research into locating the markings and their meanings across Tasmania, Victoria, and other parts of Australia. Dr Ian Evans has written extensively on his findings and has produced informative reports known as the "Tasmanian Magic Research Projects" between 2017 – 2021.

The practice of using apotropaic marks was widespread during a time when belief in witchcraft and evil spirits were common. Even though many people were practicing Christians, they still believed in the power of magic and used these marks as a form of protection. Many of these markings were found on buildings in Australia, particularly buildings from the colonial era, brought to Australia by British settlers and convicts between 1820–1850.

People believed that the doorways and windows of buildings were particularly vulnerable to the entry or passage of evil spirits.

Types of apotropaic marks include hexafoils (flower like symbols) concentric circles (circles within circles), burn marks (created by fire burns or candle burns) and concealed objects (shoes, clothing or animal remains).

Apotropaic marks come in several forms, but the most common are explained below.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES and HEXAFOILS

These marks come in many forms. Hexafoils and Concentric circles are perhaps the most common. Hexafoils (Illustration 3 & 4) are flower-like patterns of overlapping circles. It was believed that the overlapping circles and lines trapped the evil spirits as the lines and loops were endless and continuous.

The endless and confusing nature of the Concentric lines (Illustration 4 & 5) or circles were also believed to have confused evil forces and prevented them from entering a space. They were also known as "demon traps" and commonly found near entry points such as doorways, windows or fireplaces. The pictured example (Illustration 5) is one found on the brass footplate at the main entry door at Glen Derwent c.1818 in New Norfolk, Tasmania.

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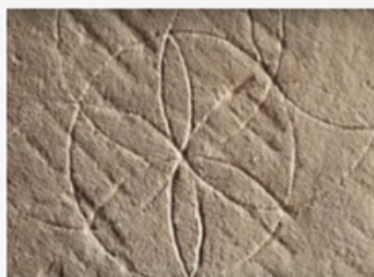


Illustration 3



Illustration 4



Illustration 5

BURN MARKS

One of the most common apotropaic mark is the burn mark. Burn marks were commonly found in stables, reflecting the importance of protecting horses during the colonial era in Tasmania. For the settlers, these folk magic practices often offered a sense of control and relief from fear. The scorch or burn marks were evil averting but also used to protect a building from fire, with suggestions that the marks offered a form of inoculation through sympathetic magic to prevent a more serious fire –fighting fire with fire.

Burn marks were created by holding the flame of a candle against the woodwork until an initial mark is created. The ash of the initial burn mark was then scraped away and the mark is burnt again until a recess is created. The marks were common near entry points like doors, windows and fireplaces where spirits might enter a building. See Illustration 6.



Illustration 6. Candle burn marks in the stables at Prospect Villa c. 1824, Hamilton Tasmania

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CONCEALED OBJECTS

The deliberate concealment of objects throughout history has often been linked to superstition, as an act to ward off evil and another form of protection for the occupants of a dwelling. The practice of concealing garments, shoes, toys, trinkets, and dead cats in houses and other buildings can be traced back to Britain as early as the 1400s. The practice of apotropaic concealment was a traditional European belief brought to Australia by the early settlers and convicts in the early 19th century.

The purpose of hiding these objects was to decoy evil spiritual forces away from the people who lived and worked in houses and other buildings. Shoes, garments, household ephemera, and dead cats were placed in voids as decoys for unpleasant intruders who would be lured into spaces from which they could not escape. Such items were hidden behind chimneys, under boards, roof cavities and wall spaces.

See Illustration 7.



Illustration 7

CANDLE MARKS

Perhaps the most enigmatic signs of past belief in magic are the marks written with the smoke from candles on the ceilings of buildings. The use of heat from the flame was thought to be a powerful tool for warding off unseen or evil forces. To date, only 16 sites where these marks survive have been found in England. There is just one such site recorded in America.

Timothy Easton from Suffolk has been investigating these marks for more than 20 years, but despite his best efforts, candle smoke marks on ceilings remain mysterious and enigmatic. Sites where the marks have been found in England date from the second half of the 17th century. Easton suggests that the fear of witchcraft may have been a factor in their use, and possibly that the sacred flame from a church was carefully carried to the site and used to draw protective marks and symbols on ceilings in vulnerable areas of buildings. Candle smoke marks were scattered across ceilings, seemingly at random. Initials and symbols, including stylised crosses, are common, although the practice is rare in itself.

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In Australia, there has only been one discovery of marks from candle smoke. These were discovered on the basement ceiling of the Ballarat Mechanics Institute (BMI) Building in Ballarat, Victoria. These apotropaic marks – symbols and letters – are most likely soot marks made from a candle and are significant as they are believed to be the only ones in Australia (Illustration 8). The ones found in the BMI Building in Ballarat may be unique in Australia and contain the repeated letters JRN, believed to be the initials of the person who created the marks, who was perhaps invoking supernatural protection.

I recently came across similar markings (Illustration 9) on the ceiling of a cellar in a historic country house in Tasmania. These soot marks were also most likely made from a candle. I have recently forwarded images of the markings I photographed to a leading authority on apotropaic marks in order to check their authenticity however, I believe they may be authentic as they appear to be deliberately made, perhaps over 150 years ago. If they are found to be authentic, they will be Tasmania's only known candle marks and one of two in Australia.



Illustration 8. Candle smoke marks on the ceiling of the basement at the BMI, Ballarat.

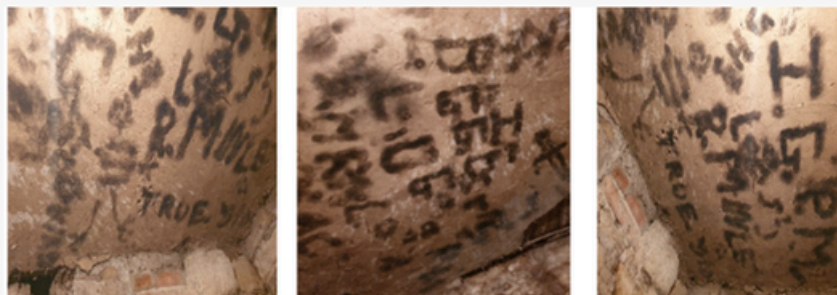


Illustration 9. Candle smoke markings found on the ceiling of a cellar in Tasmania.

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OTHER MARKINGS

There are other apotropaic symbols, such as crosses - St Andrew's crosses, circles or multiple lines used for protection on hardware made by blacksmiths. Door hinges on stables doors, poultry sheds, barns or gates were sometimes marked with an "X" to protect horses or livestock against perceived threats like witches, evil, fire and intruders. The X shape or mesh patterns of interconnected lines were believed to trap and defeat demons by playing on their supposed love for endless lines, imprisoning them within the design.

Illustration 10 shows a security bar I photographed in Kenmore at St. Peter's Pass, Oatlands, with markings aimed at protecting the occupants from bushrangers and other intruders during the colonial period



Illustration 10. Security bar on the entry door of Kenmore Arms c.1830, St. Peter's Pass, Tasmania.

For anyone who finds this topic interesting, the following publications are highly recommended for further reading, particularly Dr. Ian Evans reports.

1. The Guardian Mon 31st Oct 2016.
"Witches Marks: Public asked to seek ancient scratchings in buildings"
2. "Marks of the Witch: Britain's ritual Protection Symbols" David Clarke 2020
3. "Hidden in Plain Sight: The Search for Australian Magic" Dr. Ian Evans. 2021
4. "Tasmanian Magic Research Project: Report of the First Field Season" Dr. Ian Evans. March 2021.
5. "Tasmanian Magic Research Project: Report of the Second Field Season" Dr Ian Evans Jan 6 - 27th 2018.
6. "Apotropaic Symbols and other Measures" Timothy Easton

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