

# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT:

## THE SEARCH FOR AUSTRALIAN MAGIC

The history of magic in Australia was written in places where spiders lived: in dark, damp and malodorous cavities in chimneys, in roof spaces and beneath the floors of houses and other buildings. It was scratched onto furniture and on the walls of kitchens, barns and dairies and burned into the timber of stables.

Magic in various forms was practised by builders, grooms, blacksmiths and foundry-men and, very probably, by numerous other groups within society.

Just as in Britain and elsewhere, there is nothing in the contemporary documentary archive to describe the practice of magic in Australia. Generations of historians and researchers had scoured the paper archive without result. They were looking in the wrong place.

The great majority of Australia's practitioners of magic were the ordinary people of our cities, towns and country. They believed that there was an underworld in which demons lived and that from their dark realm they slipped into our world to do the Devil's bidding.

At a time when medicine could do little to cure the illnesses thought to be the work of the Devil's minions, and when prayer failed to move a seemingly indifferent God, people turned to magic. They took its power into their own hands and gained satisfaction from that when nothing else seemed to work. They used magic to protect their families, farm animals and property.

The techniques used were ancient and believed to be powerful. They came from England as part of the cultural baggage of convicts, settlers and administrators. Among them were cunning folk, magic's general practitioners. For a fee they would read your palm, supply love potions and magic spells and tell you where to look for your lost or stolen cow.

It was widely believed that certain symbols placed on entrances to buildings would deter evil beings from entering. And so we find hexafoils, concentric circles and, right throughout Australia, objects concealed in building voids. Concealed objects are thought to have been used as decoys to lure evil spiritual beings into voids from which they could not escape.

At last we have proof of the use of magic in Australia. It provides a new window to the past and tells us of the hopes and fears of Australians in the period before about 1930. This is the result of twenty years research by Ian Evans, author of numerous books on the history and conservation of old Australian houses. His research has taken him to medieval churches in England, a crusader fort in Syria and 1850's stables in Tasmania. In the process Ian Evans found the magic in Australia.



Young woman's boots, 1880s, subfloor, Riversdale, Goulburn, NSW.



Convict shirt, 1819 - 1848, Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. From under stair tread, level 3.



Man's boot, 1880s, and childrens' toys, Jessie Street, Richmond, Victoria. Found beneath kitchen floor.

# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT:

## SECRETS OF AUSTRALIAN MAGIC REVEALED

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Some long-forgotten secrets from the history of Australia were revealed as a result of field research conducted by a small team in the states of Tasmania and Victoria. Three seasons totalling eight weeks of research carried out over the course of two years produced results that for the first time revealed the extent of the practice of magic in 19th century Australia.

The work was made possible by funding provided by the Vernacular Architecture Group, England, and the University of Hertfordshire with additional support from Federation University, Ballarat, Victoria.

The research process initiated and conducted in Tasmania and on the mainland of Australia is unique and it is likely to open up new avenues of enquiry in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Settlers, convicts and administrators in 19th century Tasmania and mainland Australia were overwhelmingly of British origin.

So, field research for magic? How might that work? We did it this way: working from data sheets supplied by state heritage authorities, we made lists of historic properties in discrete areas where settlement had occurred during the 19th century. There were two separate studies in the Midlands of Tasmania and one in Victoria's western districts.

Letters went to property owners requesting permission to examine outbuildings on their land. Several days before setting off from our base owners were called to ask if it would be possible to visit in the near future. An itinerary and route were then decided upon and work began.

*Coragulac, Corangamite Lake Road,  
Coragulac, Victoria.*





Above, Vanessa Grant, Tully Brookes and Ian Evans looking for marks in one of the many stables visited during the Project. Below, one of the massive hardwood posts in the stables at Belmont, Raglan, Victoria. A burn mark found there is seen in this image. Its creation must have taken a good deal of perseverance.



Right, burn marks in the stables at Sherwood, Hollow Tree, Tasmania.



With two or three people in the car it was usually possible to check buildings at each site reasonably quickly. Most of the time was occupied in getting to the selected area. On any given day we expected to make three to four site visits.

We did not ask to look inside houses: many owners of significant properties are reluctant to permit unknown visitors onsite. And we had a most unusual story to tell. So we concentrated on getting into sites where we sought to establish rapport during a visit and brief owners on the research and the evidence sought.

We were looking for burn marks and other evil-averting marks: hexafoils, concentric circles and X-marked iron strap hinges. Most of these were found in stables and on other farm buildings. We also collected data on deliberately concealed objects found in building voids of houses.

If you're looking for evidence of the practice of magic in Australia, or elsewhere in the world, you need to understand a very significant fact: there's nothing about magic in the contemporary documentary archive, neither here nor anywhere else.

And the documentary archive was where most Australian researchers looked. They found nothing about magic and the conclusion was that British settlers, convicts and administrators had discarded their beliefs before setting sail for the Antipodes. Not so: the story of the magic transplanted from England is hidden in plain sight, on and in buildings of the 19th and early 20th century and on furniture of the time.

By the mid-20th century the view of Australia as a desert in which magic did not exist became set in a lot of minds. But odd things kept happening: building tradesmen and home renovators turned up finds of shoes and garments from time to time, all of them in places where they had no right to be. But these isolated finds of boots, shoes and the dried corpses of cats, most of which made their way into builders' skips, were ignored.

With the exception of Ralph Merrifield, whose *Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* was a revelation, archaeologists largely failed to accept the role of magic in protecting buildings, people and farm animals. There was an aversion on the part of archaeologists to assign a purpose to the objects that they found.

Objects were identified for purpose and assumptions about the use to which they may have been put were left to others. Many archaeologists remained reluctant to attribute ritual purposes to unusual finds. They felt that to do so would be a professional failing. The term "ritual" had long been a convenient designation for an object with no known purpose. Most archaeologists played it safe. The purpose of a shoe, they suggested, was self-evident and a dead cat was an animal whose time had come. It might be thought that this would be the point at which historians would step into the picture. Interpretation is, after all, their role in unravelling the past.



The fact that this did not happen suggested that the two professions needed to improve their communication. It also suggested a tendency by historians to conduct their research in archives and libraries, rather than in the places where history actually took place.

The result was that neither profession detected the presence in Australia of concealed ritual objects, despite the hints that were emerging in England and elsewhere. The reasons for this failure can be found in the limitations of practice in both professions as well as part of the mindset of our time. We do not expect to find objects relating to superstitious practices in today's world. Confronted with artifacts and symbols linked to this custom most people, including archaeologists and historians, go to considerable lengths to find a rational, logical and reasonable explanation. They suggest that the objects were deposited by children or animals or are random losses.

There is perhaps something else at work here. It may be a reluctance to see our sturdy and sensible pioneers as believers in and practitioners of the occult arts. There are a lot of people who subscribe to the olde-world charm of the past. The reality of a time when very different views and values prevailed is not in the least appealing to them. They seek to deny its very existence. The shock of the old is too much for them. This attitude perpetuates a glossy, soft-focussed and airbrushed view of history.

In the three seasons of Magic Project fieldwork we did not actively seek finds of concealed objects. This aspect of magic had been conclusively studied and recorded in my thesis on deliberately concealed objects in old Australian houses and buildings.<sup>1</sup> Our intention was to seek and identify the various forms of magic and in doing so to record part of the lost and secret history of Australia.

When finds were made the details were recorded and the marks photographed. In the great majority of cases these were then included in our reports. The exceptions were sites where the owner had requested that addresses and identifying details remained confidential.

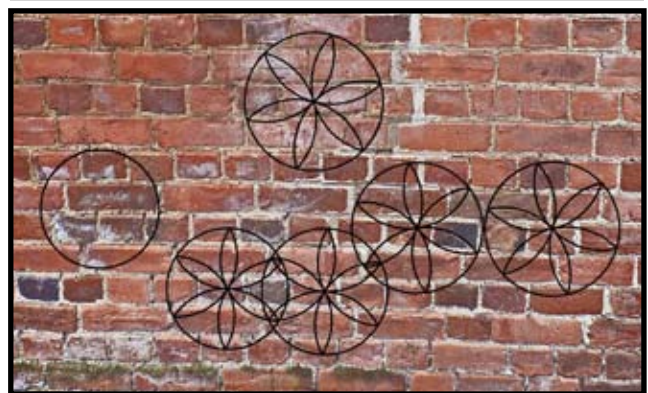
Until this work began no-one had bothered to record enigmatic marks found on old Australian buildings. Where they were noticed they were often dismissed as masons' marks, made to record and tally the work of individual craftsmen.

There's a lot of information written in old timber, bricks, stone and earth. It isn't always easily accessible and it's nowhere near as comfortable as the archives and libraries where academics have traditionally carried out their research. You have to go where the cockroaches and spiders live. The story of magic in Australia is recorded in old stables, barns, squab houses, mills and on occasional pieces of furniture.

The third field season of the Magic Project was conducted in the western districts of Victoria in July 2019. The team was based in Ballarat, in a house owned by Federation University. Ballarat is the largest centre in the region, with some 100,000 residents. Its prosperity in the 19th century was largely due to gold mining. Elegant houses and substantial shops, stores, banks and other enterprises bear witness to the wealth of Ballarat in its peak years.



Woman's boot, circa 1900, from the tower cavity, *Springbanks*, Longford, Tasmania.



Top, the 1820s barn at *Redlands*, Tasmania, Above, the back wall of the barn with a group of hexafoils marked out in dark lines. The soft brick on which they were inscribed defied several photographic attempts to bring out the shape of the marks. They were made visible by adding them to the image. 4

The western districts comprise rural areas of the state of Victoria. These extend from the south-west corner of the state to Ballarat in the east and as far north as Ararat. It is bounded by the Wimmera district in the north, by the Goldfields district in the east, by Bass Strait and the Southern Ocean in the south, and by the South Australian border in the west.

Wool and gold were the principal sources of the wealth of the region. Large rural properties were the location of many imposing houses. We were privileged to visit many of these during our time in the western districts. A significant number of these contained evidence of the practice of magic during the 19th century. We found burn marks in stables, X marks on blacksmith-made iron strap hinges, plus concentric circles as well as multifoils in a mill and in a stable building. There was an amazing group of marks in the cellar of the Ballarat Mechanics' Institute. And magical beliefs related to the mysteries of birth made an appearance.

## CAULS

It was widely believed in the 19th century that anyone who carried a caul would never drown. Sailors prized cauls for their protective powers against their greatest fear – drowning. An advertisement in *The Times*, London, in 1835 read:

*“A Child’s Caul to be disposed of, a well-known preservative against drowning, &c., price 10 guineas.”*<sup>2</sup>

Babies born “in the caul” (when their amniotic sac, or amnion, has not burst and remains intact on the baby’s head or face like a circular crown) were thought to be lucky, special or protected. According to *Wikipedia*, this may happen in less than 80,000 births. The watery symbolism of the amniotic fluid led to both children born in the caul, and subsequent bearers or wearers of cauls as a charm, to be deemed in English folklore as unable to drown.

Gathering the caul was an important tradition of childbirth: the midwife would prepare a sheet of parchment paper and transfer the caul from the baby’s head and face onto the paper. The caul would then be presented to the mother, to be kept as an heirloom and as protection.<sup>3</sup>

Prompted by the possession of a family caul, I conducted research into cauls on *Trove*, the Australian National Library’s excellent newspaper research tool. There I found two interesting reports. In May 1838 a shepherd named John Brown was driving sheep from Major H. C. Antill’s property at Molonglo Plains (now part of the Australian Capital Territory) to Stonequarry Creek when he was accosted by three men who robbed him of cash and his jacket, in the collar of which a caul had been sewn.<sup>4</sup>

Although he was far from the sea, Brown’s work involved driving sheep through rivers and streams. The caul sewn into the collar of his jacket was to protect him from the perils of the waterways of the Molonglo Plains district.

And there was this advertisement in a Sydney newspaper in 1840: *TO BE SOLD— An Infant’s Caul, in a perfect state of preservation, price £10. Apply by letter (post paid) to A. H., Australian Office, Bridge-Street.*<sup>5</sup>



A poppet found under the floor of a Launceston, Tasmania, house. Believed to have been used for love magic, these crude human representations of the intended target were buried, burned or pierced.



The Molonglo River in the 1920s.





Taken together, reports such as this and the caul passed down through my family from a seafaring ancestor, suggest that cauls were well-known, if not common, in Australia in the first half of the 19th century. There may be other cauls, surviving but unrecognised, in the community.

The caul I have is a charm that comes as a result of ancient and almost forgotten beliefs. It has a distinct history of its origin in Australia. Very shortly after the 1863 birth at Gladstone, NSW, of Camilla, a daughter of my great-grandfather, Alfred Evans, the membrane that she carried into the world on her head was transferred onto a piece of parchment-like paper to keep it safe.

The paper was then folded and placed in a very small purse. The sheet of paper on which it was placed measures 100mm square. It was folded several times and when reduced to 25mm square was placed in an inner pocket of the purse.

The secret this object held for so long is now revealed. A ritual of English seafarers was brought to Australia by Camilla's father and embedded into life here. Born at Southwark on the banks of the Thames in 1820, Alfred Evans was in Sydney by 1851. After some five years as a cooper on whaling ships plying the southern oceans, he moved to Gladstone in northern New South Wales.

Alfred had carried knowledge of the power of cauls across the oceans. I know of no other such example of direct personal transmission of magic practice from England to Australia. At Gladstone Alfred Evans used his knowledge of the power of cauls to protect his daughter and perhaps others of his numerous children. Other charms may have been made from this family membrane.

Camilla carried the purse throughout her life and it eventually came to me, and so provided direct evidence of a rare form of magical protection. Camilla's caul combines the mystery of birth with ancient beliefs in spiritual powers to safeguard men who braved the perils of the sea.

*Below, the house at Gladstone, home to Alfred and Sarah Evans and their children. The Macleay River is a few hundred metres away. Top left, Camilla as a young woman. Centre left, the purse in which she carried the caul. Left, the caul, unfolded.*





## CANDLESMOKE 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. To date, only sixteen sites where these marks survive have been found in England. There is just one such site recorded in America. The Suffolk researcher Timothy Easton has been investigating these marks for more than 20 years but despite his best efforts candlesmoke marks on ceilings remain mysterious and enigmatic. Sites where the marks have been found in England date from the second half of the seventeenth century.

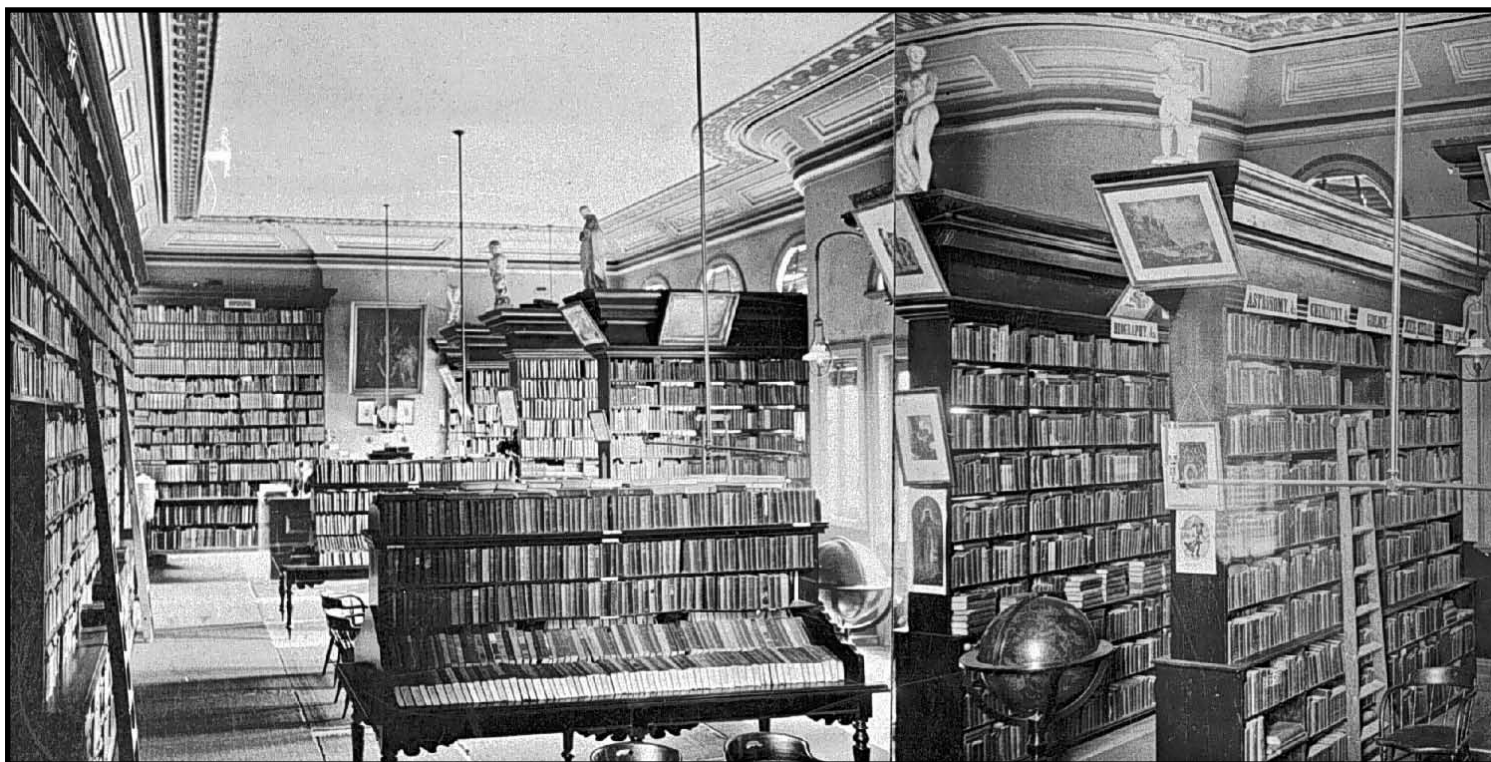
Easton suggests that the fear of witchcraft may have been a factor in their use. If the marks are apotropaic in nature, it is possible that the sacred flame from a church was carefully carried to the site and used to draw protective marks and symbols on ceilings in vulnerable areas of buildings. Candlesmoke marks are scattered across ceilings, seemingly at random. Initials and symbols including stylised crosses are common, although the practice is rare in itself.

Having been aware of Easton's recording of English candlesmoke marks for some time it came as a considerable surprise to see them in a significant 19th century building in Ballarat, 160km north-west of Melbourne. The plaster ceiling of the basement of the Ballarat Mechanic's Institute is generously decorated with the marks. The purpose of the marks is somewhat enigmatic: but there is sufficient content in these messages on the ceiling to suggest apotropaic intent.

The symbols appear to have been made with some care. The shape is drawn onto the ceiling with an instrument, possibly guided by a carpenters' rule, and then the fully-realised mark is made by tracing over the pattern with the smoke of a candle. This all appears to be very deliberate: the marks are not random patterns made by some idle person. The device used to establish the framework of the marks may have been a carpenters' pencil. These have thick leads and draw a sturdy line.



The BMI today. *Below*, the BMI library, 1909.





Above, candlesmoke marks on the ceiling of the basement at the BMI, Ballarat.

These are the first marks of their kind yet found in Australia. Reported by David Waldron of Federation University, they may be unique in this country. The person who made them may have been working from a memory of such marks in England. The letters JRN, repeated in several places on the ceiling in the basement, were perhaps the initials of the person who created the marks. If so, it appears that he was invoking supernatural protection.

Mechanics' Institutes are educational establishments, intended to provide information about technical subjects to tradesmen and to offer them an alternative pastime to drinking in hotels or gambling. The first of these were established in Scotland in the early 1820s. Hobart's Mechanics' Institute opened in 1827, followed by Melbourne in 1833. They offered inspirational and vocational reading matter for a small rental fee.

The Institutes were an important step towards a more egalitarian society. The Ballarat Mechanics' Institute was founded in 1854 and the building in which it is now housed opened in 1860. The building has seen many changes but its lending library continues to operate. The BMI's website sums up the important role these organisations played in community life:

*Before Government funded libraries and adult education, the Mechanics' Institutes provided people with much-needed access to books, newspapers, periodicals, lectures and scientific demonstrations. Their halls also provided local communities with a place for social, cultural and recreational gatherings.*<sup>6</sup>

Flooding has been a problem in the basement of the BMI since at least 1877. It has been suggested that this is the result of defective construction of an adjacent building. Numerous attempts to solve the problem have not succeeded. Entering the space as I did in 2019 required the use of masks to avoid inhaling mould spores that appear to exist in the area to a considerable extent.

In 1882 Frederick W. Atkinson leased the basement and a wine shop with frontage onto the street outside. It was not a success and Atkinson fell out with the board of the BMI.<sup>7</sup> This conflict and the frequent flooding of the basement may be linked to the text and symbols painted on the ceiling with lighted candles. The date of the candlesmoke marks appears to be 1882 as this year appears among the symbols on the ceiling.



Top, one of the marks on the ceiling at the BMI, Ballarat. Above, a similar mark from St. Andrews Church, Whittlesford, Cambridgeshire. (David Waldron, Federation University).



## CUNNING FOLK AT WORK IN AUSTRALIA

The Magic Project's fieldwork in Tasmania and Victoria found numerous examples of the use of magic by a good many people. On and in houses, farm buildings and mills we recorded hexafoils, concentric circles, burn marks and deliberately concealed boots, shoes, garments and the skull of a Tasmanian devil. Sites of these finds throughout Australia included houses both humble and grand, police stations, court houses, the Melbourne mint, a 1930s high-rise building in Melbourne, Sydney Harbour Bridge and a lighthouse in Western Australia.

We identified just three practitioners of magic: two cunning men and a cunning woman. Cunning folk were magic's general practitioners. They claimed to be able to locate stolen property, identify thieves and future husbands, find lost or stolen cows, procure love, heal the sick, provide protective charms, cast horoscopes and release the bewitched from evil spells cast upon them by enemies.

Both of the Tasmanian cunning men were publicans. William Allison ran the *British Hotel* in Hobart in the 1850s. "Dr." Benjamin Noakes was the publican at the *Albemarle Arms*, near Oatlands, in the 1830s, an establishment well known to the police at the time.<sup>8</sup> Noakes used potions made with herbs to cure his patients. Many of the herbs are identified in Allison's *Almanac and Notebook*, now in the Tasmanian Archives.

The notebook contains numerous recipes said to be useful for a variety of conditions. One potion consists of a mixture of turpentine, neatsfoot oil and oil of camomile, all heated over a slow fire and corked "close." Its uses? "Streans, Bruises, Sore Brests, Scalds, Rhumaticks, and Foot Rot in Sheep."

The first identified Australian cunning woman, Mary Barrell, was discovered by Dr. David Waldron of Federation University, Ballarat. Deserted by her husband, Mary Barrell made her living by telling fortunes. We know nothing of her life story before she bobbed up in Ballarat in the 1860s. But we know quite a lot about her husband, William.

Thanks to the local police, who issued a warrant for William on a charge of desertion, we know that he was aged 56, about 5 feet 7 inches tall, of medium build and fair complexion with grey hair. He wore a small grey goatee, had missing front teeth, a scar over his right eye and a birthmark like a bunch of grapes on one arm. His initials were tattooed on his arm, together with a design of a ship, the latter implying that he was or had been a mariner.<sup>9</sup>

Mary Barrell, left without the support of a husband, scraped an income telling fortunes. It is easy to be critical of people like Mary but she, like many others at that time, found themselves out of luck and with very few choices. This is a story that still resonates in the Australia of today.

Mary set up business from her home in Lexton Street, adjacent to the old Ballarat cemetery. From there, she was available to comfort and advise a stream of women who came to have their fortune told. The price, according to a local complainant, was one guinea and upwards.<sup>10</sup>

Telling fortunes would not be enough to label Mary Barrell as a cunning woman. But she was also accused of activities that complete the picture of her practice of magic. A neighbour in Lexton Street, probably



Above, marshmallow, one of the many plants used by Benjamin Noakes, a cunning man with a distinctly herbal leaning. Noakes' death certificate refers to him as Dr. but there is no record of any such qualification.

a labourer named John Ryan who conducted a vendetta against her for many years, accused Mary of pretending to cure sickness and disease and of foretelling death and misfortune.<sup>11</sup>

Complaints against Mary Barrell continued over the years. In February 1876 Ryan threatened to kill her.<sup>12</sup> He appeared in the City Police Court on 9 March and was ordered to keep the peace.<sup>13</sup> The peace may have lasted for a time but in January 1878 Ryan assaulted Barrell, kicking and punching her. He was fined 40/-.<sup>14</sup>

There were many more dramatic moments in the life of Mary Barrell but we do not need to know them all. The events quoted here give the flavour of the years she spent dispensing advice and fending off her critics. Despite failing eyesight and deafness<sup>15</sup> she continued to meet clients in Lexton Street until her death in 1896.<sup>16</sup> She was buried in the old general cemetery, close to her home. John Ryan's vendetta against her continued for years, perhaps until after her death. Mary's grave was desecrated and it remains today as a patch of bare earth among the granite and marble memorials to Ballarat's elite.<sup>17</sup>

## MAGIC BURN MARKS

Every rural property in 19th-century Australia had at least one stable. Some had a stable for working horses employed on the farm and another for the horse or couple of horses used in carriages to transport family members to and from the nearest town. Without horses, life on the land and the production of grains for food would have been impossible. Horses were valuable: in 1830s Hobart a single horse was worth £60 to £70.<sup>18</sup>

Larger properties typically had several heavy horses, powerful animals used for ploughing and other major tasks. In stables, heavy horses were provided with large stalls – a function of their size and power.

The *Hobart Town Gazette* in 1826 described a typical day's work for horses at that time:

“The ploughing is done by horses in pairs without a driver, each ploughman feeding and grooming his own horse. The horses work nine hours a day when employed on the farm, in which time a pair will plough an acre....”<sup>19</sup>

While it would be unrealistic to expect that every farm horse was well treated we found evidence suggesting that respect and affection for the horses was perhaps more likely than the alternative. At *Woolbrook*, Teesdale, Victoria, the stables are gone but the names of horses painted on an old wall speak of respect and affection on the part of the property owner at the time. There were Rose, Liz, Lion, Nell, Prince, Una, and Ajax. Ajax would certainly have been a heavy horse, as perhaps were Lion and Prince.

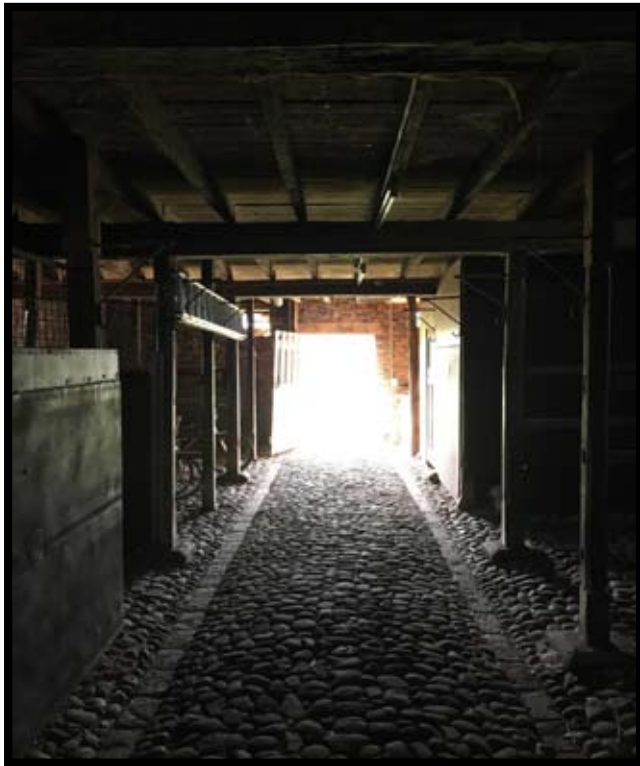


Charles Keane and his team of heavy horses cutting hay, *Springbanks*, Longford, Tasmania, 1930. (Bill and Priscilla Cox archives).





Above, grooms in the stableyard, *Hinton House*, Woodford, Northamptonshire. (Historic England, AA97/05213).  
Below, the stables at *Junction Lodge*, Carisbrook, Victoria, are the second on this site.



Stables were built with considerable care and no small expense. These were home to valuable horses. The grooms who cared for them lived onsite, often next to the tack room where harnesses and saddles were stored.

Basalt, commonly known as bluestone, was the material of choice for stable construction in the Western Districts of Victoria. Floors were constructed with cobblestones laid so that urine flowed away from the stalls and drained out of the building. Hay stored in the attic space was funnelled down through chutes into a hopper located against the back wall of each stall.

The risk of fire was a constant danger. Horses living among highly inflammable hay and straw were a source of worry and fear. In many 19th-century stables in both Victoria's western districts and in the Midlands of Tasmania grooms took precautions against malicious acts inspired or caused by beings from beyond our world. It appears that marks burned with candles into the wood of stall posts and partitions were thought to immunise buildings against fire.

The destruction by fire of stables and other farm buildings was common in Australia during the 19th century. The original timber stables at *Junction Lodge*, Carisbrook, constructed to house thoroughbred horses, burned down some 50 years ago.<sup>20</sup> The stables at *Woodlands*, Crowlands, were destroyed when a lightning strike ignited dust in the air, causing an explosion that seriously damaged the building.<sup>21</sup> A man who carried a candle into the stables of the *Bricklayer's Arms*, Elizabeth Street, Hobart, one night in December 1826 was responsible for a fire that destroyed the stables and the inn.<sup>22</sup>

Burn marks in stables are the most numerous indications of the practice of magic in the Western Districts of Victoria. The same can be said for the Midlands of Tasmania where these marks are very common in 19th-century stables and a number of mills. The burn marks in stables appear to have been of a generally apotropaic nature, perhaps intended to guard against fire as well as illness and disease among the horses resident in a stables building.

Belief in the magical power of burn marks may have originated in Scotland with the formation in the 17th century of a secret group known as the Society of the Horse-mans' Word. This group spread into southern England in the 19th century. Its members were said to have power over horses and the ability to command them to obey by using a secret word. These men were the original horse whisperers and were often employed as grooms.

New members were initiated into the Society in a ceremony conducted in a stable or barn at midnight. They were made to wait outside until they were blindfolded and led into the room where members of the Society waited. The crackling of a fire, a whiff of sulphur and the clatter of chains gave atmosphere as they were invited to "shake the devil's hand" – in reality the hoof of a goat – and then given

a secret word which they were sworn never to reveal. Afterwards, as a senior member of the Society of the Horsemen's Word filled out their application form, they were asked for their personal details, address and secret word. Any lad who fell for this and gave his word was in trouble.

While it is not known if any members of the Society came to Australia the widespread use of burn marks in Australian stables suggests their presence here and their influence and power to practice their magic.<sup>23</sup>

#### THE FURNACE AND THE FORGE: BLACKSMITH'S MAGIC

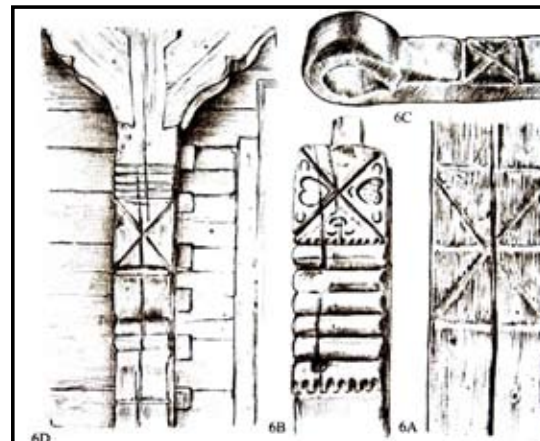
Blacksmiths worked at the fringes of the technology of their time, turning ore found in forests and valleys into the tools and implements that served people on farms and in settlements. There was a whiff of alchemy in this and no surprise, then, that they were treated with respect and awe.

Nor should we be surprised to learn that blacksmiths practised their own form of magic. Heavy timber doors that stood guard on buildings where animals or foodstuffs were kept were furnished with iron strap hinges marked with a symbolic X.

We found these marked hinges on the doors to the cider house at Woolmers, Longford, Tasmania, and in other locations on barn doors where sheep or other animals were housed. X-marked hinges were found on the doors of the barn and the squab house at Saundridge, Cressy, Tasmania.

The Magic Project's fieldwork in Tasmania and mainland Australia found numerous examples of the use of magic by a good many people. On and in houses, farm buildings and mills we recorded hexafoils, concentric circles, burn marks and deliberately concealed boots, shoes, garments and the skull of a Tasmanian devil. Sites of these finds included houses both humble and grand, police stations, court houses, the Melbourne mint, a 1930s high-rise building, a light-house in Western Australia and the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

We noted that various groups within the community had their own forms of magic which they used for defence against evil emanating from the underworld. These included builders, horsemen, shepherds, blacksmiths and mariners.



Top, the blacksmith's shop at Woolmers, Longford, Tasmania. Centre, one of the hinges on the cider house at Woolmers. Next, some examples of protective X marks. (*Physical Evidence for Ritual Marks, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain*). Below, four X marks on a door hinge at the barn, Saundridge, Tasmania.





There were also men and women who did not fit into any of these occupation-based forms of magic. These were the people who made the various marks that we found in houses, farm buildings and on furniture: the hexafoils, multifoils, concentric circles and merels. Knowledge of these protective devices was widespread but we cannot say with certainty that we know who made them. It is safe to say that a variety of forms of magic was practised but not all of its practitioners and their particular brands of magic are known to us at this time.



The skull of a Tasmanian devil: a concealment at *Morningside*, near Campbell Town. The skull was under the floor at an entrance into the house. No other devil bones were found.

## A MAGICIAN IN RURAL VICTORIA?

With fieldwork completed there was time to look at what I soon realised was the season's most intriguing discovery. We had found just two hexafoils in two weeks of fieldwork in the western districts of Victoria. I say hexafoil but these are not like any such mark seen before in Australia. Instead of the usual six petal shapes within the circle there were twelve, the result of what appear to be two interlocking hexafoils. These are known in England as multifoils.<sup>25</sup>

The first was found and recorded at *Glenormiston*, a substantial property on which an initial dwelling became progressively more substantial and elegant from 1847 onwards. The 1908 homestead is representative of the grandeur and scale typical of Victoria's western districts, reflecting the great wealth attained by many families.<sup>2</sup>

The mark we found in the stables was noteworthy for its unusual form. Three days later we found another mark, differing in some of the detail but essentially identical. This was at *Anderson's Mill*, Smeaton, a property of an entirely different nature.<sup>27</sup>

Following the conclusion of fieldwork I sat down to write the report. It was then that I found the opportunity to take a long, slow look at the two marks. These were not hexafoils. Strictly speaking, their numerous arcs made them dodecafoils but multifoil is easier to say. So, two marks with considerable similarity.

Another point of similarity between the two finds was that both of the main marks were found to have a companion: the concentric circles mark. Instead of the usual cluster of eight or ten circles, each set within the other, there were three circles at *Glenormiston* and four at *Anderson's Mill*.

The circles had been made with dividers that also served to



Left, *Glenormiston*. The staircase is richly decorated with carvings by Robert Prenzel.

create the petals of the multifoils. A large pair would have been required, as would considerable strength to manipulate the tool and force its point into the timber of the stable wall at *Glenormiston* and the plastered reveal of a window at *Anderson's Mill*.

Examination of the context of the finds provided an additional similarity. They were not in the stables or barns of less prosperous settlers, scratching their living on small farms. Both marks were created at sites of considerable prosperity, in fact wealth.

*Glenormiston* was established in 1839 on land that within a few years amounted to 17,000 hectares. Enlarged in a number of phases from the mid-nineteenth century, the extant homestead is a two storey rendered building in an *Arts and Crafts* style with entrance belvedere tower, two-storey faceted bays, corner quoin work and *Art Nouveau* balustrading to the entrance hall staircase.<sup>28</sup>

The *Anderson's Mill* complex comprises a huge bluestone mill building, water wheel, 23 metre tall brick chimney, bluestone office, stables, granary, blacksmith's shop and residence. The complex was built for the Anderson brothers from 1861 onwards to service Creswick's prospering agricultural district. The ten bay bluestone mill building is four stories high with an attic storey in the gabled slate roof. Another point of similarity may be of no significance: both properties were owned by Scots.

Considering the matter carefully, I've concluded that the marks we found in these buildings were made by the same man. There are just too many similarities for coincidence to come into play. I say he was a man because of the strength required to scrape the marks into wood and plaster with a pair of dividers.

He may have been a professional, known in his area and called in by owners or managers concerned to take all necessary steps to protect valuable property. An employee, perhaps a groom or a carpenter? I don't think so. The two properties are quite different in nature. A cunning man? Or he might have been someone higher in the ranks of magical practitioners, a conjurer or self-styled wizard. An impressive title could have justified a higher fee.

I do not know who he was or where he came from but getting to the sites would have required journeys on horseback or, less likely, by carriage. The sites are a considerable distance apart. On the modern road the journey is 160 km.

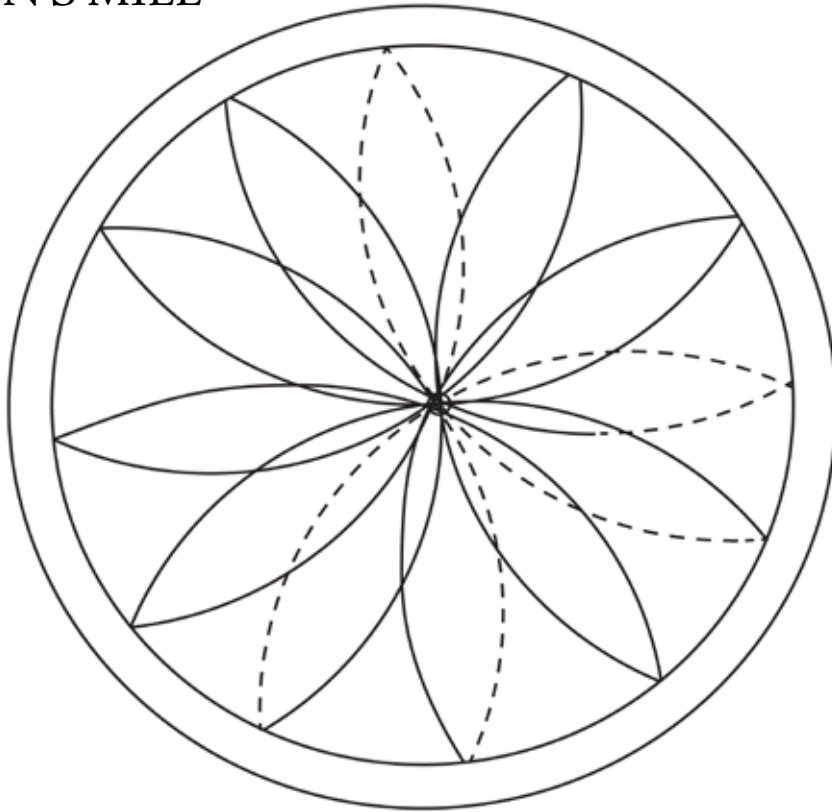
Anderson's Mill, Creswick, Victoria.



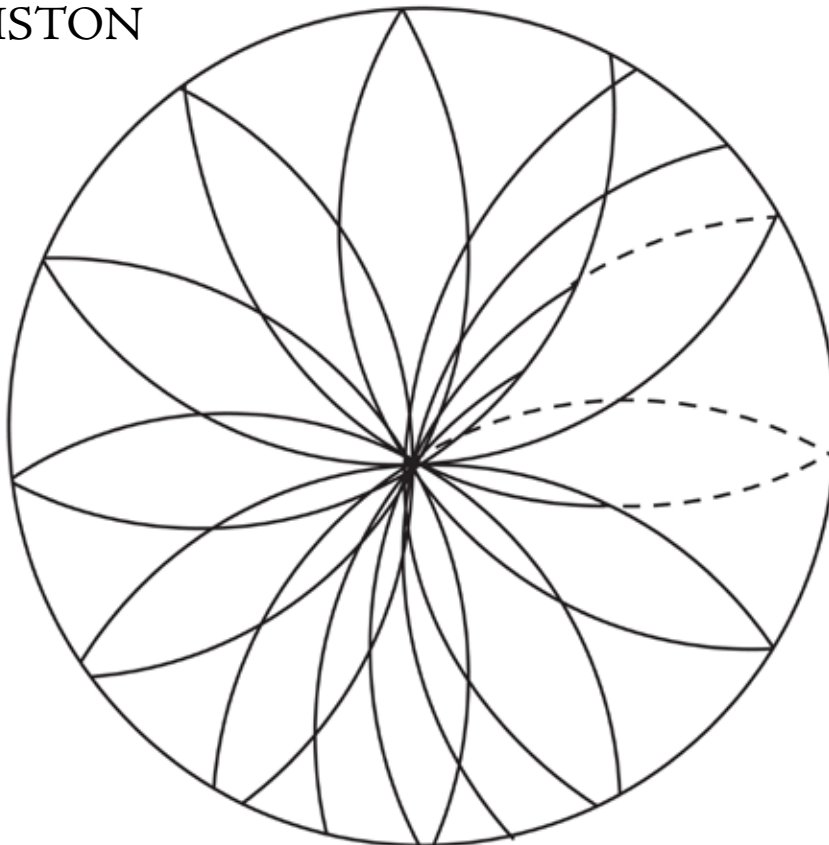


# WESTERN DISTRICT MULTIFOILS

ANDERSON'S MILL



GLENORMISTON  
STABLES



This man is a phantom to us. But we can see where he has been and what he has done. In his time, he seems to have been a go-to man for protection against the forces of the underworld. He was highly skilled and knowledgeable in his craft. He worked in Victoria's Western Districts and he may have lived there as well. The marks he created are, at the present date, unique in Australia and not common in England.

And he raises the question: who made the various hexafoils we have found? Perhaps they were made by the carpenters on the large estates. It's also possible that these were the work of professionals: invisible men who may never be identified.

But now we have reason to believe that they were there, protecting Australians from evil by placing apotropaic marks on walls or furniture. Their story has never been told but these anonymous magicians were important and probably feared and respected men in their time. Unseen and long forgotten, they played a silent role in our history.

Nothing like the Magic Research Project has been undertaken anywhere else in the world. We developed and implemented a new way to discover and understand the use and extent of magic in a territory occupied by British settlers in the 19th century.

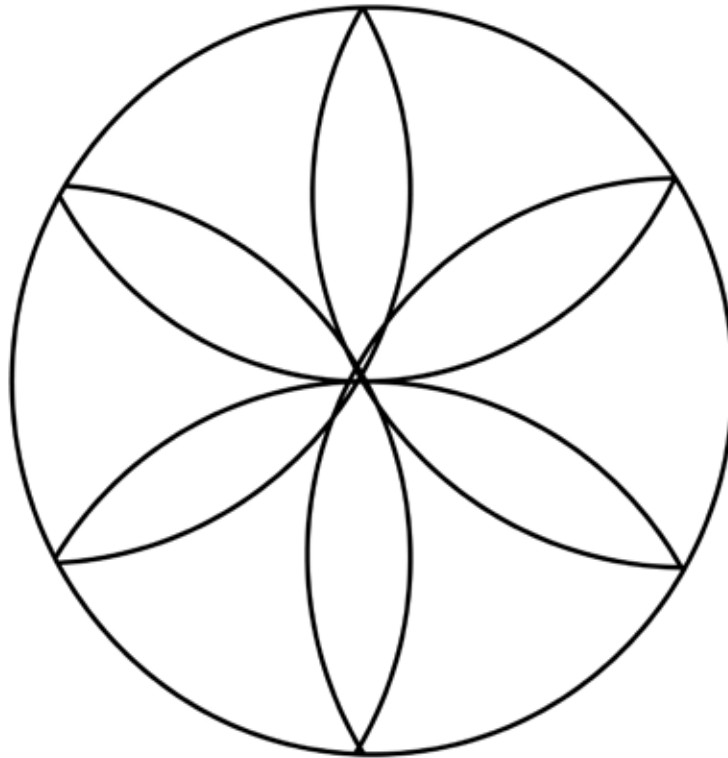
These people brought with them a set of beliefs and a culture that they used for comfort and cultural reasons in a place they must have found intensely unsettling, bizarre and disturbing. They turned to magic when their children died and they used magic to protect themselves and their families from evil beings entering their lives from the invisible underworld.

They had arrived in a place where the seasons were turned around, making Christmas a time of unbearable heat. Strange and unlikely animals lived in the countryside, absconded convicts roamed the land and, on occasion, the Aboriginal inhabitants attacked their homes or slaughtered their shepherds and their families who lived in isolated huts. The night sky was full of strange stars and the forests around the settlements were loud with the unearthly screams of Tasmanian devils.

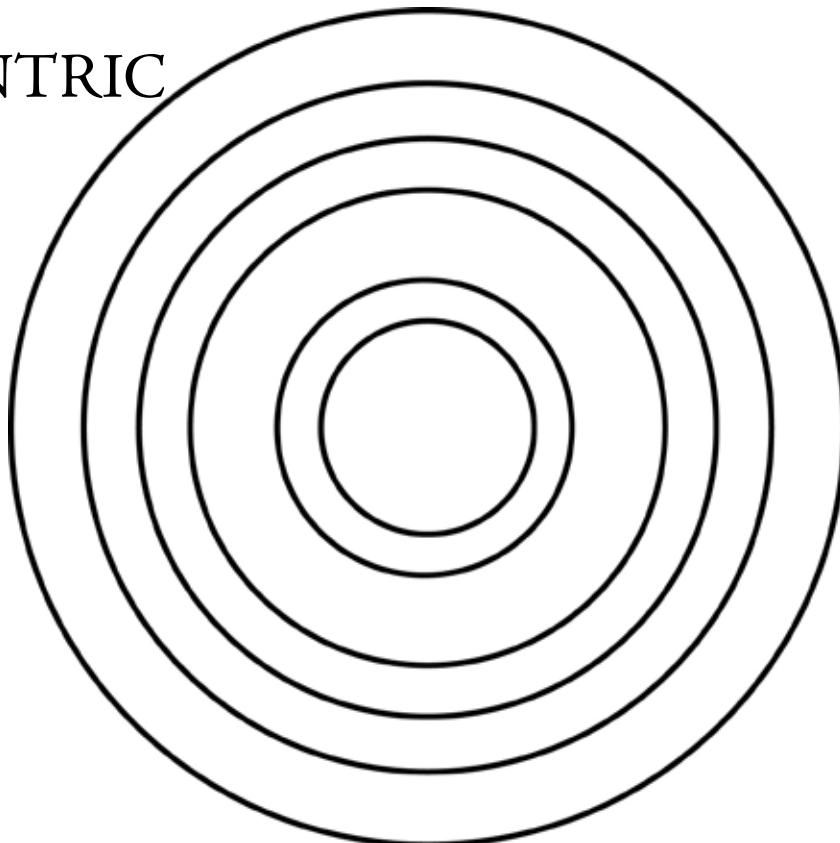


# COMMON MAGIC MARKS

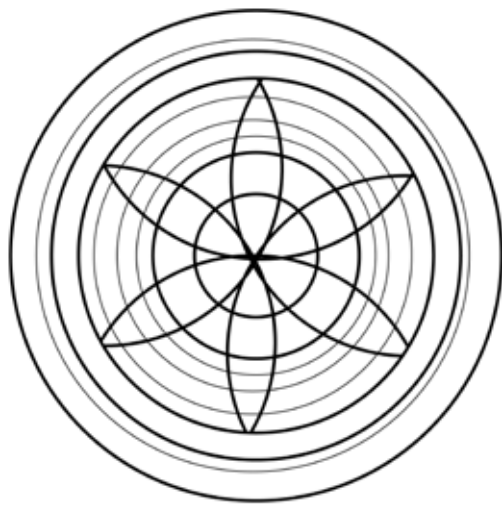
HEXAFOIL



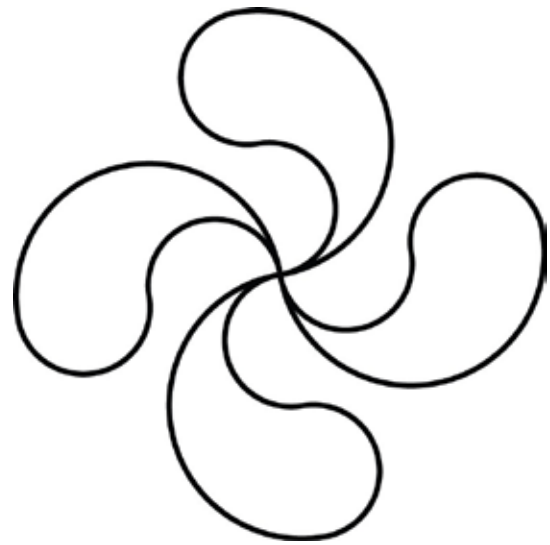
CONCENTRIC  
CIRCLES



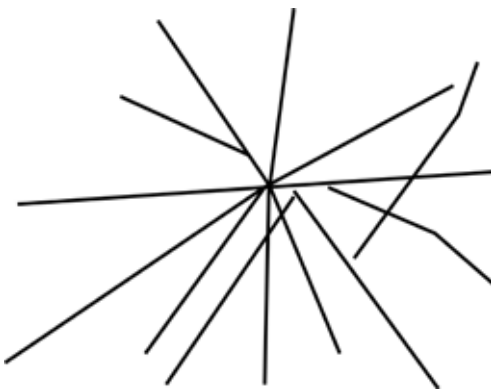
# LESS COMMON MAGIC MARKS



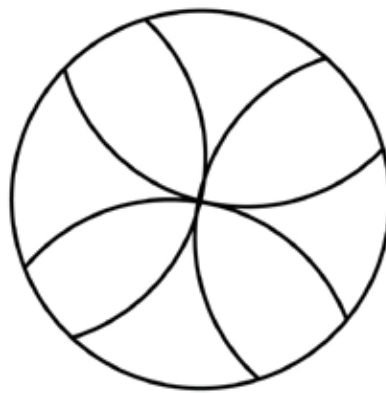
Combination mark: hexafoil and concentric circles.



Swirling swastika



*Above left*, merel. No two are the same. *Above centre*, consecration mark



*Left*, blacksmith's X mark forbidding entry of evil spiritual forces. Cider house, Woolmers, Tasmania. *Right*, burn mark in the stables, Bowsden, Tasmania. Burn marks appear to have been used to inoculate buildings against fire. They are common in stables and mills but in Australia are rarely seen elsewhere.



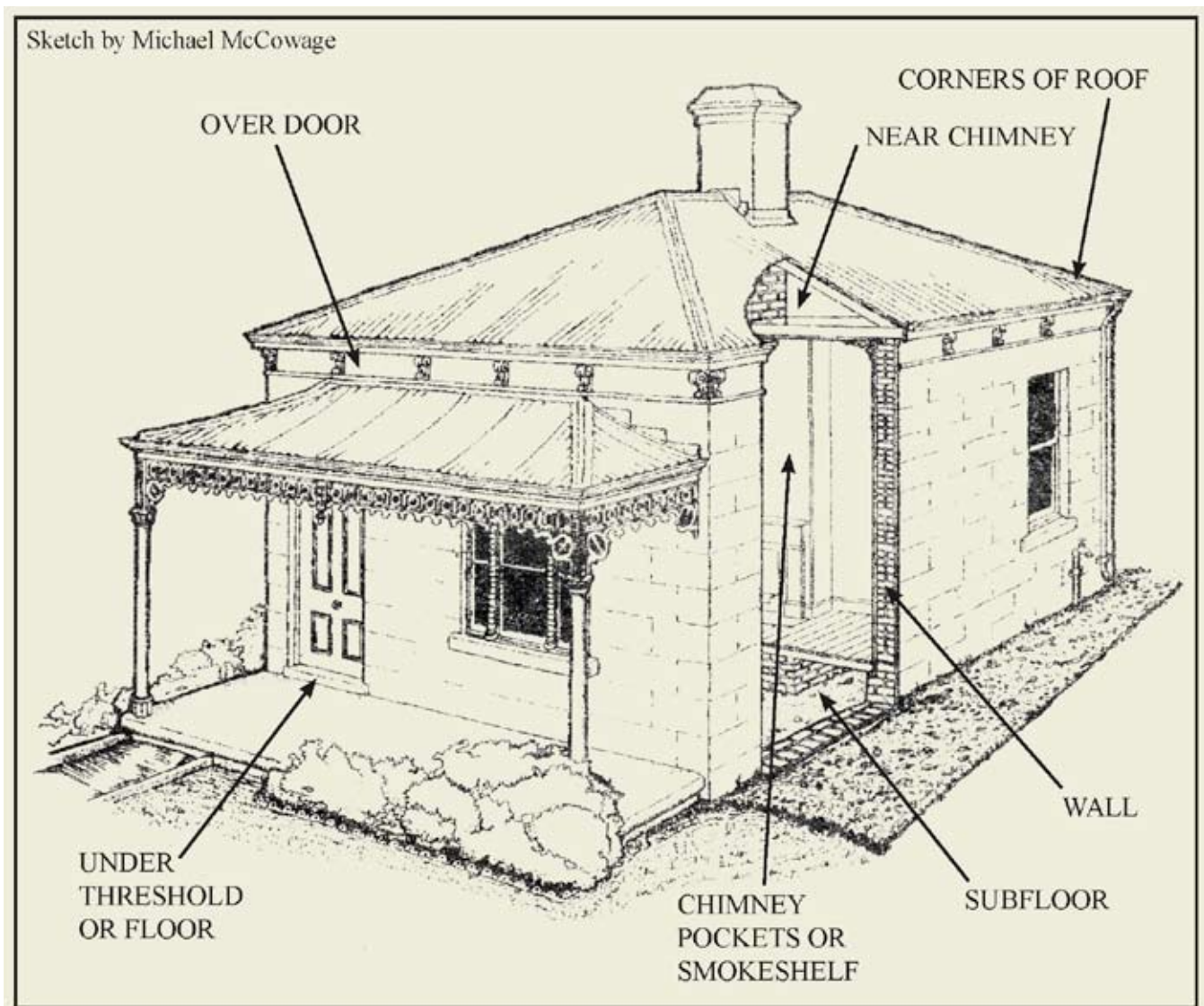


# MAGIC AT HOME

Much of the initial research was done by media release. When taken up by newspapers or by ABC Radio and television interviewers throughout Australia, reports of odd finds in odd places flooded in. Boots and shoes were by far the most common finds. But finds of garments, domestic objects and dried cats were also reported.

In the past such finds were regarded as curios, no significance being attached. But contact with researchers in England and the United States brought confirmation that this was a practice with an ancient origin. There were no amulets of gold or silver decorated with mysterious symbols and no bizarre charms such as a wizard might have been expected to use. This was the magic of ordinary people.

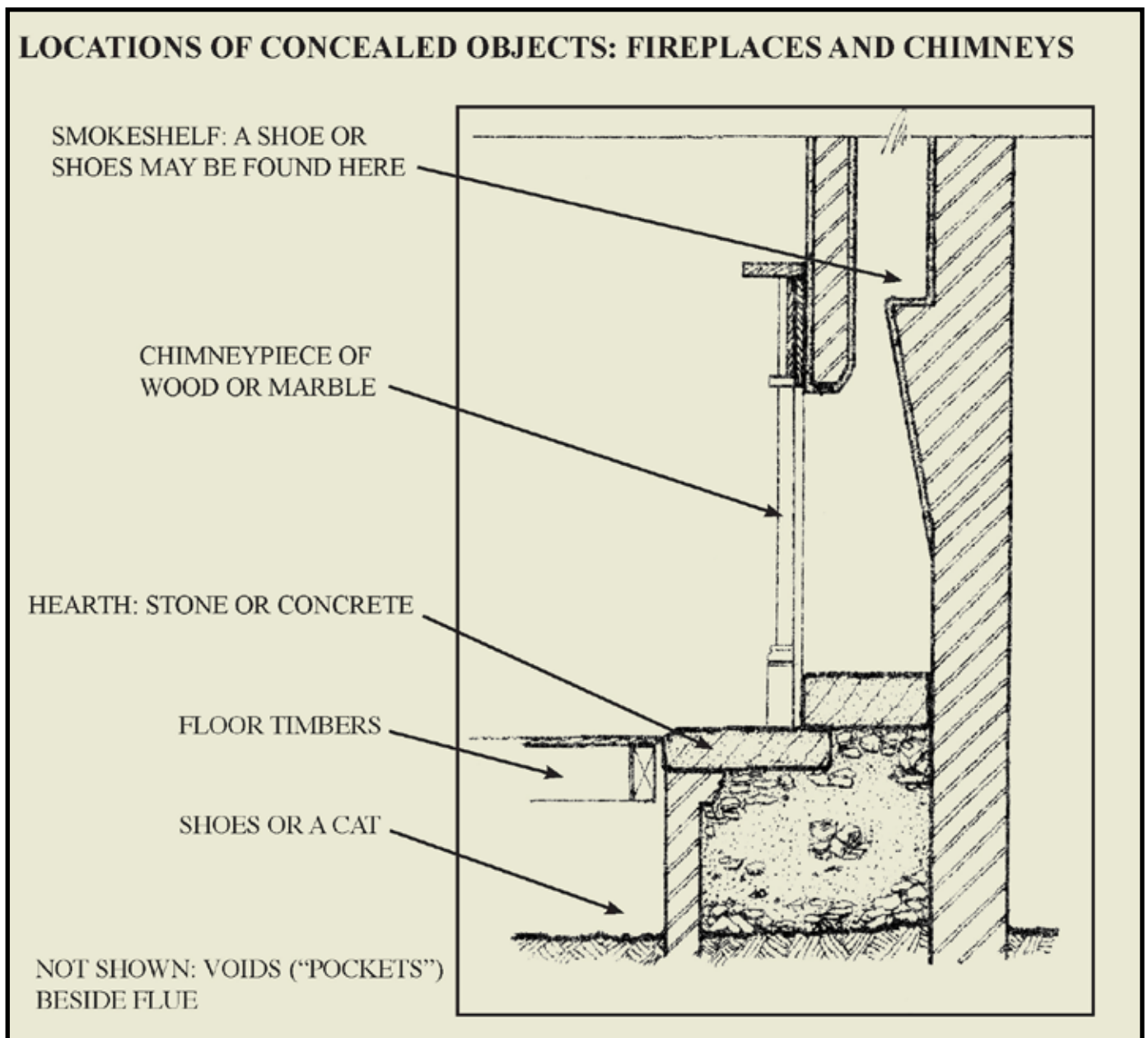
And it was the people who owned or used the buildings where deliberately concealed objects were found who contributed photographs and information to this research. The result, after some six years' work, was a PhD thesis: *Touching Magic: Deliberately Concealed Objects in Old Houses and Buildings*. (University of Newcastle, NSW, 2010). The image below provides a summary of the places in which objects were found in houses. The purpose of these objects was to protect points of entry.



Efforts to find contemporary documentary evidence of the practice of concealing objects in buildings produced nothing. Research in libraries and archives in the UK, US and Australia was fruitless. The widespread use of concealed objects has now been recorded in all of these countries, as well as New Zealand.

The widespread adherence to the same procedures in concealments suggests the power of an oral tradition spanning many centuries. This was a practice that must have been known to almost everyone but which was at the same time secret. These practices were carried across the seas to Australia in the minds and memories of settlers, convicts, soldiers and administrators. Magic protected them in a place far from a home to which they would never return. Old boots, shoes and garments were placed in building voids to lure evil spiritual beings into traps from which they could not escape.

The sketch below by Michael McCowage illustrates the use of concealed objects in protecting one of the most vulnerable places in houses and other buildings. The fireside and the hearth offered warmth and comfort but also the potential of harm. With its flue open to the sky, the kitchen or parlour fire invited unwelcome intrusion from evil beings passing over the landscape.





# PROTECTION FROM EVIL

The search for evidence of the practice of magic was not limited to the three field surveys. Information came from friends and from people who heard about this work from media reports. Evil-averting marks were found on mantelpieces, furniture and buggy whip handles. In one spectacular find a walking stick, richly carved and ornamented, was discovered beneath the floor of a British military building in Oatlands, Tasmania. Other finds included less dramatic concealed objects: boots and shoes, garments and dead cats.

Cities, towns and the countryside were infused with magic. Magic was part of the everyday life of people throughout the country. They turned to magic when their children died and they used magic to protect themselves and their families from evil beings entering our lives from the invisible underworld.

Hexafoils, for example, were found in Tasmania, far North Queensland and Western Australia. The widespread use of magic, both in Australia and England, suggested a practice with a very long history. This was something that was never discussed openly or described in the documents of the time. But the objects told their own story.



Above and left, this wash-stand from Launceston held a secret, only discovered when the daughter of the house in Frankland Street dropped something on the floor. She got down to pick it up and glanced at the underside of the stand. The hexafoil she found there is accompanied by several circles.



Apotropaic marks on early Tasmanian whip handles: a hexafoil and numerous concentric circles. Casuarina whip handle with metal cap, circa 1835. and whalebone whip handle, 1820 - 1830.

*HOBART TOWN GAZETTE* 1 APRIL 1825 page 2

On Wednesday, just before the dusk of the evening, as Mr. & Mrs. SAMUEL SPODE were coming to town in a buggy, their horse took fright near the 1st mile stone, on the bridge at the bottom of the hill, and the vehicle from the horse plunging through the fence and over the side of the bridge was literally dashed to pieces; by which unfortunate accident we much regret to add the lady and her husband were so dreadfully injured that their recovery still remains doubtful.



# MAGIC IN THE COURTHOUSE



Oatlands has the rare distinction in rural Australia of possessing an original Supreme Court house. The township's origins extend back to a visit to the area by Governor MacQuarie in 1821. He named it Oatlands in a probable allusion to the good crops obtained in similar country in his native Scotland. Oatlands was to be the capital of the interior of Van Diemen's Land.

The Court House was constructed in 1828 by convicts wearing leg irons. A small detachment of Her Majesty's 3rd Regiment of Foot, the Buffs, had arrived in 1825. They were followed by the Royal Staff Corps with 35 skilled tradesmen. Their task was to clear the town site, erect government buildings and mark out streets.

In the 1920s the Court House was bought by people named Thomas and it became home to their large family. Births and family celebrations including wedding receptions took place here. The cedar table dates from this period of ownership.<sup>29</sup> David Bedford, Australian furniture connoisseur, has suggested a date of circa 1835 for the manufacture of the table.

The single drawer is notable for two apotropaic marks: a hexafoil and a set of concentric circles. The hexafoil is partially inscribed on the flange at the base of the knob on the right side of the drawer. This provides a clue to the period in which the hexafoil was created. It must have been made post 1835, making it the first hexafoil find that can be dated, at least partially.

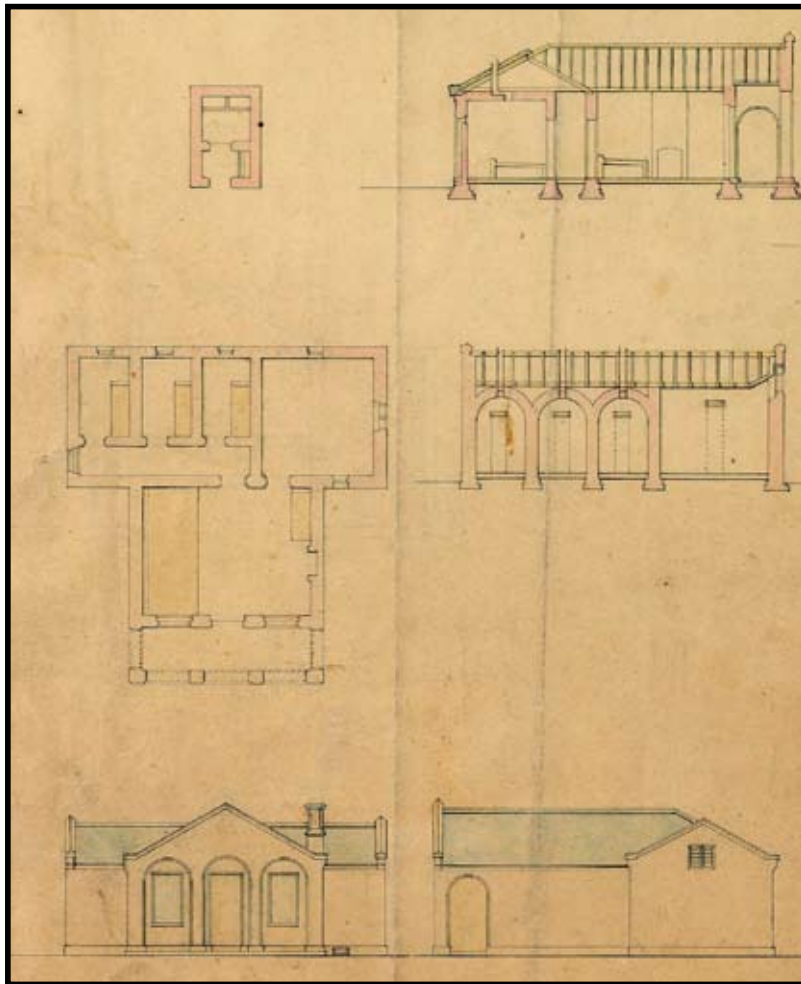




# MAGIC UNDER THE FLOOR: THE OATLANDS WALKING STICK

Sometime in late 1827 a detachment of the Royal Staff Corps arrived in the fragile little Tasmanian settlement known as Oatlands. Led by a Lieutenant Vachell, the small band of troops had probably marched the 60 or so miles north from Hobart over the rough tracks that passed for roads at that time.

Vachell's men included stonemasons, carpenters and a blacksmith. I have no documentary record of their skills but the buildings they constructed in their time in Oatlands tell us their trades. A wagon may have accompanied them with their baggage, bedding and tools on board. In Tasmania at that time soldiers would have expected hard going.



The Royal Staff Corps, founded in 1800, was responsible for smaller construction projects for the British military. Their task in Oatlands, a settlement with a gravel pathway between a handful of huts, was to provide the structures necessary for the administration of the Midlands. In doing so, they would lay the foundations for civilised life in the heart of Tasmania. It was anticipated that Oatlands would become the thriving core of Tasmania's Midlands, a city rising at the centre of the fields of grain in the surrounding countryside.

Vachell, as a well-trained member of the Corps, would have had knowledge of mathematics, the principles of fortification and the drawing of plans using the instruments provided, together with an understanding of what were termed "the mechanical trades" and their application to military purposes.

His kit would have included a box sextant, a surveying compass, a case of mathematical instruments, a box of colours and drawing implements and a field sketch book. He may have prepared the plans and elevations that accompany this text.

My 2010 thesis at the University of Newcastle, NSW, *Touching Magic: Deliberately Concealed Objects in old Australian Houses and Build-*

*ings*, provided evidence of an ancient ritual of the building trades.

Tradesmen, including stonemasons, carpenters, bricklayers and others, concealed objects in voids in buildings under construction to decoy evil spiritual beings away from the people who would use those buildings.

There is evidence that Lieutenant Vachell and his men knew of this ritual and used it in the first building they constructed in Oatlands. This was a stone guardhouse with a floor of stone slabs, three cells for prisoners and racks for the muskets of the troops who were to man it. Vachell and his team won the respect and admiration of the Europeans in Oatlands and in the sparsely-populated surrounding areas for their hard work and skill. A correspondent for *The Tasmanian*, Hobart, wrote in March 1828 that:

*A house built for the Commanding Officer is finished in a superior style. This house has entirely been got up by a detachment of the Royal Staff Corps stationed in this place, and reflects equal credit on Lieutenant Vachell's judgement and on the Workmen engaged. A cedar mantel piece merits particular attention, which, if it is not the finest in this Island, is certainly one of the finest ever seen in it.*



*The Commissariat, Oatlands. Its stores of food, tools and weapons were issued to troops, members of convict work gangs and administration officials in the earliest period of settlement in the region.*

The guardhouse served to protect the adjacent commissariat building where stores of food and other supplies were kept for members of the convict chain gang and the military. The guardhouse was demolished in the 1970s. Recent archaeological work at the site revealed a surprising find.

Just inside the location of the Guardhouse's front door a carved and decorated walking stick of whalebone was found, its top a clenched fist facing the entrance. The stone slabs of the flooring had been carefully placed over it.



To the 21st century mind there is no logical reason for this object to be there. But Lieutenant Vachell's men were carrying out their duty as they no doubt saw it. The guardhouse provided protection from wind, rain and snow, and from attack by humans, whether convicts, bushrangers or the Aborigines who roamed the country around Oatlands, attacking the isolated huts of shepherds and their families and killing them where possible. Protection of the guardhouse building on the spiritual plane was also provided by its builders. Members of the the Royal Staff Corps were inheritors of an age-old tradition.

The walking stick with its clenched fist was both a threat and a decoy, providing protection to the occupants of the guardhouse from evil beings from the underworld where demons were thought to roam. The men of the Royal Staff Corps believed that supernatural beings would have been aware of the barrier they faced, even though its hiding place made it unseen by humans.

The walking stick is an example of the seaman's craft known as scrimshaw. Its probable origin lies with a member of the crew of one of the many whaling vessels that visited Hobart in the early 19th century. It's the work of a skilful scrimshander but a man who was working with a limited number of tools. It bears evidence of the use of a knife or knives but little more than that.

We cannot know for sure how it got to Oatlands, or who placed it snuggled into the earth before the stone slabs of the Guardhouse floor were put on top. The walking stick lay there for almost 200 years before archaeologists working on behalf of the Southern Midlands Council brought it back into the light of day in the 21st century.





*Demolition debris has been cleared away and the walking stick from the earliest days of European settlement in Van Diemen's land arrives in the 21st century. Untouched by human hands since 1827, it lies in its original position, its clenched fist pointing towards the front door step. Its maker was perhaps a seaman or cooper on one of the many ships that hunted for whales in the vast ocean to the east of Tasmania.*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks are due to the owners of the 109 properties we inspected in Tasmania and throughout the western districts of Victoria. Their cooperation enabled us to develop a much clearer picture of the use of magic in Australia in the period before about 1930.

Also vital to the success of the Project was funding from the UK Vernacular Architecture Group. Lee Prosser and Nick Hill of the VAG team were hugely helpful. Owen Davies arranged funding for the first field season from the University of Hertfordshire. Federation University, Ballarat, provided a house during the third Field Season. The NSW Heritage Office provided funding for research in the State.

The Magic Project team included Tully Brookes, Vanessa Grant, David Waldron, and myself as Director. Myfany Kernke was an active researcher in the early days of the work.

Ruth Hazleton took care of our social media publicity and Ian Boersma supplied Heritage Tasmania reports on individual properties. Eric Ratcliff found a rare item beneath his kitchen floor and generously provided access to it. Warwick Oakman told us of the hexafoils on the barn at Oaklands. Ian Morrison of the Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office brought his research abilities to the matter of the two Tasmanian cunning men. Steve Dunbar found a way to create the image of the hexafoils from the barn at *Redlands* and brought his expertise to play at many other locations.

In the first field season Anne Kernke of *Shene* generously provided us with the use of her late mother's house at Bagdad. David Kernke was always there if we needed support and advice.

Catering for the third field season was by Annie Evans who kept us well fed.

Particular thanks are due to Timothy Easton and June Swann, below. Timothy, a noted artist, researched the history of magic in England long before it was on the academic radar. June Swann, MBE, was for many years curator of boots and shoes at Northampton Museum and later an international consultant on footwear throughout the ages. She is credited with discovering concealed shoes in English houses and buildings.

Both shared their great knowledge and assisted my research in so many ways. I could not have done this without them. They have my sincere gratitude.



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