

St Luke's Farnworth



Witches Marks

by Geoffrey Poole

Witches' marks - ritual protection symbols or apotropaic marks - have been found in many historic places, from medieval churches and houses, to barns, and caves.

The word 'apotropaic' comes from the Greek word for averting evil. The marks were usually scribed onto stone or woodwork near a building's entrance points, particularly doorways, windows and fireplaces, to protect inhabitants and visitors from witches and evil spirits.

They date back to times when belief in witchcraft and the supernatural was widespread. Magical symbols and ritual objects were a common part of life from around the 16th to the early 19th century.

A common type of apotropaic mark is known as a daisy wheel, though most research in this field describes these marks as hexafoils. These six-lobed 'flower' patterns vary considerably in size. the hexafoil was by far the most commonly occurring mark. They are certainly the most easily recognisable. See the illustrations below.

Apotropaic is a Greek word meaning Apotropaic magic (from Greek αποτρέπειν "to ward off" from από- "away" and τρέπειν "to turn"). The magic marks were usually scribed onto stone or woodwork near a building's entrance points, particularly doorways, windows and fireplaces, to protect inhabitants and visitors from witches and evil spirits.

Daisy wheels, or hexafoils





These six-lobed 'flower' patterns vary considerably in size. According to the responses we had from the public, the hexafoil was by far the most commonly occurring mark. They are certainly the most easily recognisable.

The origins of the symbol can be traced back into antiquity. The purpose of hexafoils is disputed. For example, the world of Wicca, which is a contemporary Pagan religious movement, sees them as sun motifs.

Another school of thought suggests they are purely secular and could be geometric exercises for apprentices - they certainly do appear as geometry exercises or in manuals. However, their interpretation

as a ritual protection mark is the most widely accepted theory at present.

They are found extensively on churches in the form of graffiti, and also occasionally in the designs on portable and not so portable medieval objects, for example chests and heavy stone fonts to name but two.



We must see if we can find some in St Luke's although no one is encouraged to climb up to the rafters. There are a number of masons marks around the church which could be mistaken for witches marks.

MORE ARTICLES TO FOLLOW

[Last Page]