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WITCHCRAFT COUNTER-SPELLS IN CHARING

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Many books have been written on the subject of witchcraft but not so many on the measures taken by people who wished to protect themselves and their property. As soon as fear of witchcraft developed, so must counter-measures have been created to combat whatever was believed to be the threatening source.

The first ecclesiastical laws condemning witchcraft in this country would seem to be those published by Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the seventh century. The following penalties are in the section dealing with sorcery:

Resorting to demons – One to ten years' penance.

Practising as a magician or enchanter – Expulsion from the Church.

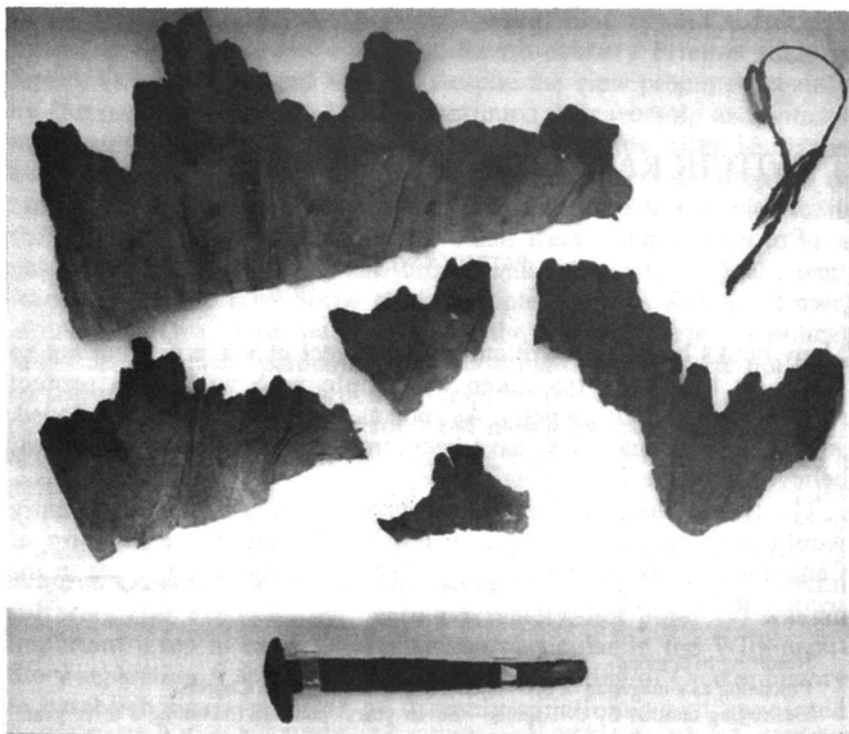
Destroying another by evil spells – Seven years' penance (including a three years' fast on bread and water).

Women using divination or devilish witchcraft – One years' penance.

Astrologers and storm raisers – Five years' penance.¹

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the fear of witchcraft was reaching a peak, sometimes being used as a political weapon. Bishop Jewel addressed a sermon to Queen Elizabeth I, relating sorcery as a '*rank weed of Popery*'. The first major witchcraft trial was in 1566 at Chelmsford, in Essex, and others soon followed. James VI of Scotland wrote his book *Demonology* in 1597. He is said to have believed that Earl Bothwell conspired against him using witchcraft. People protected themselves in a number of ways. Charms, such as a stone with a hole through it, were carried. A charm could also be in the form of an incantation, written or spoken. A talisman was thought beneficial when engraved in the form of a magical symbol or word upon stone or metal.

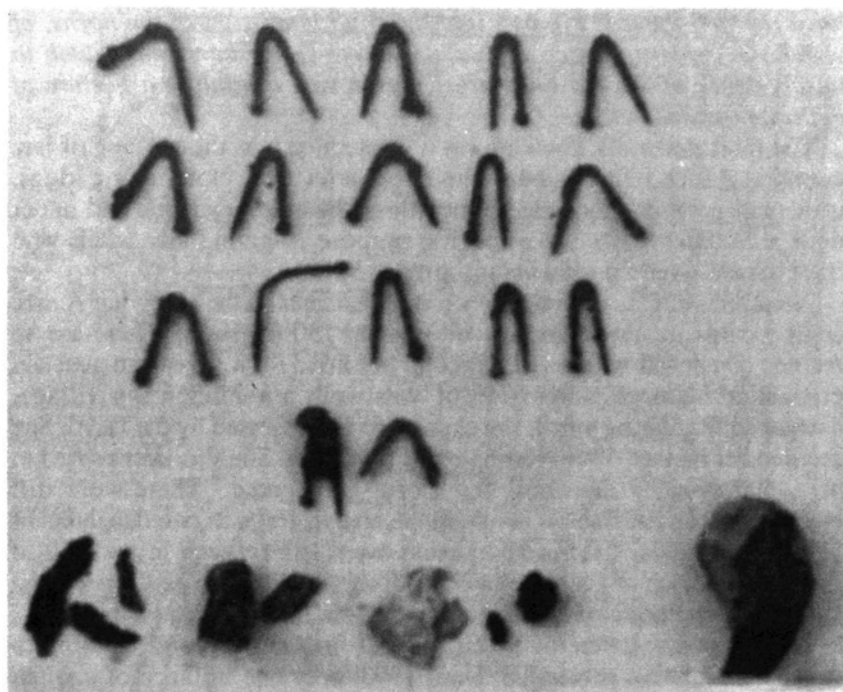
¹ E. Maple, *Dark World of Witches* (1962).



The witch charm from no. 32 High Street, Charing, after conservation.



The two jars from nos. 27 and 29 High Street, Charing.



The contents of Jar A (large enough to be photographed) from nos. 27 and 29 High Street, Charing.

Iron was deemed to be a powerful weapon as it was believed witches could not touch it, and iron, when in the form of a horseshoe was powerful magic. Salt seems to be a preventative, and it is said that in some country districts, iron and salt were put at the bed foot of a new born child as recently as this century.² Glass witch balls, mainly green in colour, were hung inside windows as a warning to witches. There used to be a collection of these for sale in an antique shop specializing in glass objects in Whitstable in the 1930s. The Lord's Prayer, written on paper and carried in a boot or shoe was considered helpful. As late as 1879, it was reported that people planted rowan trees on their ground and carried a sprig. Children who had to pass a reputed witch's dwelling on the way to school, were given sprigs of rowan to carry.

² P. Hughes, *Witchcraft* (1972).

Eric Maple in his book *Dark World of Witches*, says that 'For ages men have resisted the evil eye by using the traditional sign of the horns, of which the modern victory sign is a variant, whilst the vulgar thumb to nose gesture of the old-time street urchin was originally a gesture of defiance against witches.'³

The most generally known form of protection was the burying of jars containing such items as bent pins, iron nails, hair, cloth, nail parings, urine and perhaps blood, in the hearth of the chimney stack and under door sills. Each item had a specific purpose in giving any witch who tried to pass over the jar a painful time.⁴

According to C.L. Ewen, witchcraft indictments in the surviving Assize court records for the Home Circuit number 130 for Kent.⁵ There are no records of alleged witches in Charing, but in 1574, a seventeen-year-old girl called Mildred Norrington of Westwell, a neighbouring village, developed fits, during which she claimed to be possessed by the Devil. She accused her mother Alice Norrington of witchcraft. She was later proved to be a charlatan, but not until her 'fame' had spread.⁶ There were still members of the Norrington family in the area in 1605, as two daughters of Simon Norrington, Crispin and Ursula, were left 1s. each in the Will of Elizabeth Howlen of Charing. In 1645, Joane Walliford, Joan Camden and Jane Holt, were accused of being witches and were hanged at Faversham.⁷

These instances were sufficiently local for the people of Charing to step up their house protection. Until 1993, only one instance of a witch jar had been found in Charing. In the 1960s the owner of The Old House in Station Road, asked for the help of Mr P. Oldham and the Charing and District Local History Society to excavate the floor of the main room before it was laid with concrete. In the back right-hand corner of the seventeenth-century chimney hearth a 'Bellarmine' jar was found. No contents were recorded and the jar was retained by the owner.

Early in 1993 a sealed chimney was opened up in no. 32 High Street. From the architectural and documentary evidence the chimney had been built in the seventeenth century. A charm was found about five feet up on the right-hand side inside the chimney. It had been set in wet

³ E. Maple, *op. cit.*

⁴ For evidence of other witch jars in Kent see the following volumes of *Archaeologia Cantiana*: lxxx (1965), 252 – West Street, Gravesend 1962, a 'Bellarmine' jug. 255 – Clapper Farm, Staplehurst, late eighteenth or early nineteenth century stoneware bottle. lxxxiii (1968), 252 – Yew Tree House, Brook 1966, a 'Bellarmine' bottle. xcii (1976), 227–8 – 'The Elephant's Head', Hook Green, Lamberhurst, 1975, a 'Bellarmine' bottle.

⁵ C.L. Ewen *Witch Hunting and Witch Trials* (1929) 117–265.

⁶ R. Seth *Children Against Witches* p. 122, Hale.

⁷ *Faversham Institute Journal*, x, 169. London, 1645: reprinted London, 1837.

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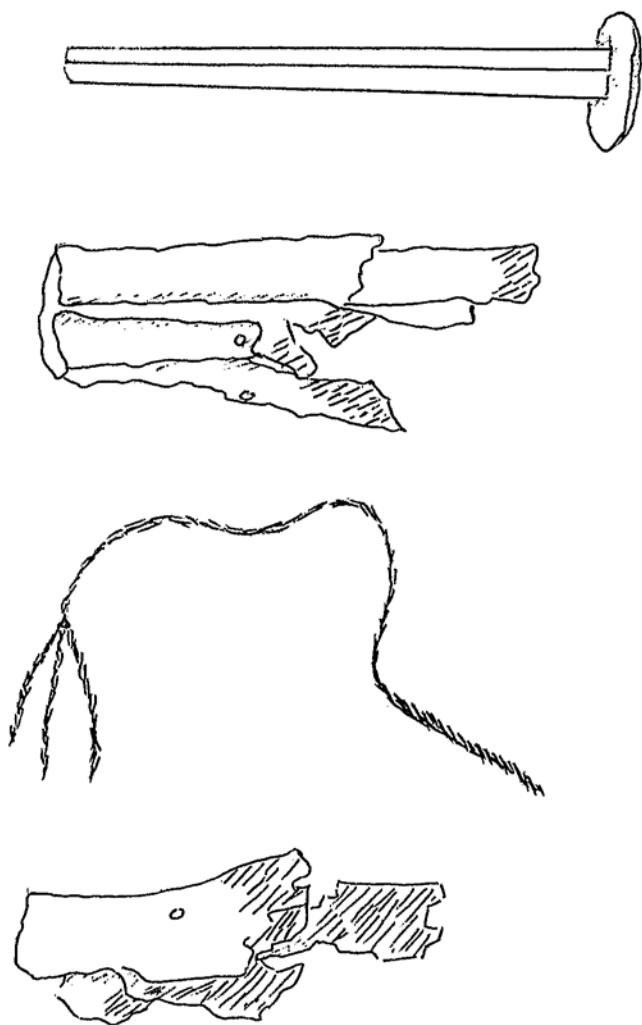


Fig. 1. The witch charm from no. 32 High Street, Charing, before conservation.

mortar and so presumably was placed there when the chimney was built. It consisted of a handmade iron nail around which had been wrapped a piece of paper sealed with animal glue. For further security the paper was tied on with a length of linen string with a tassel at each end (Fig. 1). The charm was sent for analysis and conservation to a specialist paper conservator, Miss C. Lewis, whose report states that:

The paper was in a brittle and friable condition. Some areas of the paper were badly charred. Examination of the paper under ultra-violet and infra-red light was carried out. This revealed patches of animal glue but no writing. A microscopic examination of the paper revealed spots of red paint. (Red is a colour associated with witches).

Fibre analysis was also carried out to determine the composition of the paper. This revealed that the paper is mainly made of linen with some hemp. The piece of string is made from linen.

The iron nail is handmade and typical of those made up to c. 1750.

In the summer of 1993, nos 27 and 29 High Street, Charing (originally one building), were undergoing renovation during which another seventeenth-century sealed chimney was opened up. Under the bricks of the central hearth two small jars were found and removed by the builder. Jar A was all but complete but Jar B was broken into two pieces with about 50 per cent of the jar missing. It would seem that the jars were once identical in size and design with a hard light brown glaze speckled with blue. They were about 5 in. in height, depending on the original size of the neck which was broken on both jars.

The contents were examined using an Olympus VE3 × 40 microscope and found to contain in Jar A – the more complete pot:

17 round-headed pins of copper alloy, pointed ends, bent double. One of the pins has a lump of corroded matter attached. There seems to be iron, a hair and a spread of yellow gunge which I am told is sulphur.

2 small pieces of wood pierced with holes.

Burnt charcoal flakes.

Quartz – round grains.

Bone flakes and tiny fragments – possibly some powdered bone.

3 threads from a greenish colour textile.

Calcite dust with quartz grains.

Odd moulded pieces of calcium carbonate and quartz grains, the consistency of lime mortar.

3 small pieces of iron stained bone.

2 small pieces of iron.

Strand of hair, only visible under microscope.

Jar B. had lost most of its contents but contained:–

1 pin as described for Jar A.

2 small flaked pieces of iron stained bone.

1 strand of thick hair (yellowish colour).

2 strands of textile fibre.

Debris containing iron granules with calcite and quartz.

The experience in Charing indicates that it is worthwhile looking in detail at early chimney stacks and floor areas near any door leading to the outside of the building when renovations are taking place.