

Ritual Marks

From the late medieval period onward there was an increasing fear of malevolent witches & the harm they could inflict on an unsuspecting household. It was widely believed that a witch or their animal familiar could enter a house through doorways, windows or the hearth. The open chimney was thought to be particularly vulnerable.

There were various ways to protect the chimney. “Spiritual middens”, voids filled with family items such as shoes, were common but further protection came from ritual, or “apotropaic”, symbols drawn or carved around the hearth.

An unusually large number of these ritual marks can be found in The Priest House, particularly on the beam above the kitchen fireplace; probably carved, layer upon layer, from the late 16th century, when the chimneys were built, until the early 18th century, when the house was divided into two cottages.

These marks are difficult to decipher but many are probably of religious significance, representing M or W, for Virgo Virginum (Virgin of Virgins) or X, for the cross of St. Andrew. There are also a large number of circles, including a hexafoil or “daisy wheel”, which may represent the sun, a common symbol of good luck. Similar marks can also be seen on the door of St. Margaret's Church, West Hoathly.

Ironically ritual marks are the most common form of witchcraft found in England, where, in contrast to the rest of Europe, official prosecutions for witchcraft were rare & seldom successful.