

# *Origin of Strange Customs*

*by Frederick Wickert*

Not long ago I wrote a story about some shoes found in the foundations of an old school house built in the 1860's. I was intrigued by it and wondered about the custom of putting shoes in a building and did some research about it. I learned some interesting facts.

The custom or tradition of putting shoes in a building, date all the way back to the fourteenth century. The earliest recorded reference to the use of shoes as some kind of spirit trap has to do with one of England's saints. His name was John Schorn and he was the rector of North Marston from 1290 to 1314. He is reputed to have performed the remarkable feat of casting the devil into a boot.

The oldest concealed shoes date back to roughly the same time as Schorn. He may have begun the tradition. We don't know for sure. It is possible that his legend simply records a pre-existing practice, but there have been no findings of the practice prior to him.

About 26% of the shoes are found in chimneys, placed on a ledge built within the chimney. They may be discovered by themselves, or sometimes they are with other artifacts of interest. A small percentage of them are pairs, but most of them are single shoes. About 40% of the shoes found have belonged to children.

Shoes in those days were not a cheap item. They were possibly one of the most expensive items a family had to purchase. Shoes, because of the expense were repaired as often as possible before being thrown away.

Other items have been found concealed in old buildings, but shoes are by far the most common. Museum curators advise that should you discover some shoes hidden in a building, you should record the location of the find in relation to north in the building. The number of lace holes they have, whether in your opinion it is a man's, woman's boy's or girl's, and the date of the find. It is also important to ascertain if possible, the date of the building. Garments have also been occasionally found and should be recorded in the same way as the shoes.

Another practice, that of concealing "Witch-bottles," seems to have begun in the 16th century. Almost always in the 16th and 17th century, a gray stone ware bottle known as the "Bellamine," was used. It got it's name from a Cardinal called Bellamine who published much anti-protestant literature. The bottles were pot bellied and have masks of a dour looking bearded man stuck onto them. They are mostly of German stone ware and are known as Bartman bottles. Later, glass bottles were often used, though the practice seems to have been less popular after the period of the 16 and 17 hundreds.

The contents of these witch bottles are interesting. They often contained urine and iron pins or nails. Also common was human hair and urine. Other ingredients are some times found. Some of these ingredients in the bottles have been small bones, thorns, pieces of wood and occasionally a piece of fabric cut in the shape of a heart.

Significant are the locations where these bottles are found. There seemed to be great emphasis in placing them near the entrance and exit points of the buildings. Many were also located near the hearth. The hearth is always open to the sky and considered a major source of worry where entities of a supernatural nature were concerned. A great effort went into the concealing of these bottles. It is difficult to imagine the fear of the supernatural that one felt the need to go to all the trouble of lifting the hearth, digging a hole under it, placing a "witch bottle" under it and covering it with dirt, and then the hearth stone.

Far less frequently than shoes or "witches bottles," other items have been found concealed in old buildings. These include dried cats, horses skulls, written charms and ritual marks.

One wonders what events caused people to behave in the way they did in concealing these things in the buildings, and whether subsequent disasters ever caused the people to come to the conclusion that they did not work.

Even in modern times I can easily envision a “witches Bottle” being a great deterrent. Who might be willing to face the possibility of being assaulted with a bottle of urine? Certainly not me, but then, I’m not supernatural.