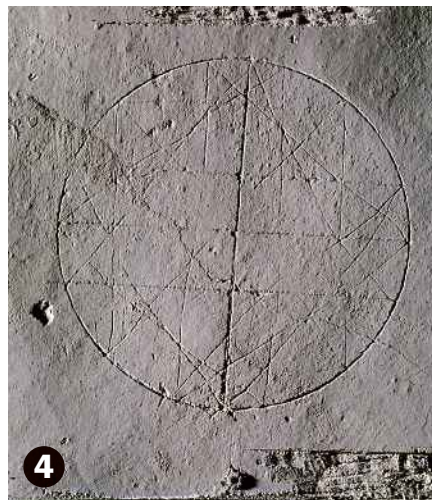
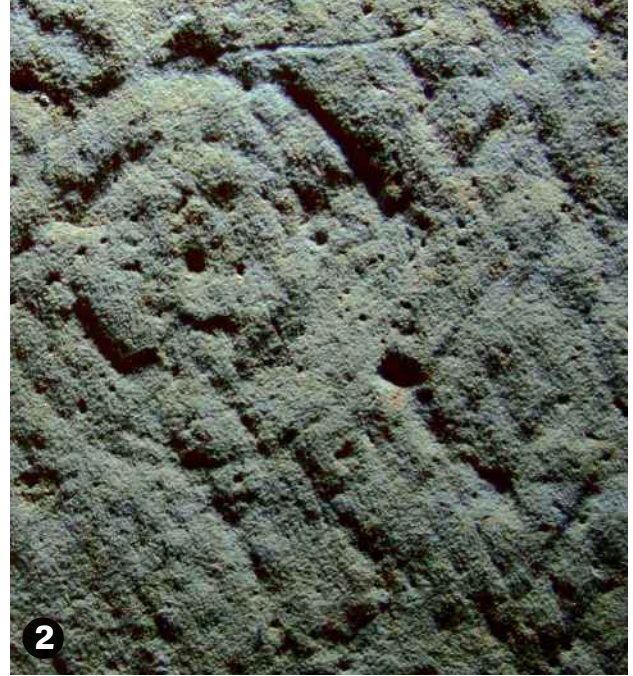


WITCH MARKS IN NATIONAL TRUST PLACES

As you might expect from an organisation that looks after so many old buildings, the National Trust has a fine collection of witch marks, and many of them are on public view



1 The timber-framed Tudor-period Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire has more than 250 apotropaic symbols including burn-marks, circles and criss-crossed lines, but you might need a guide with a torch to point them out to you. One of the most elaborate is a 12-petal daisy wheel high up on a ceiling beam in the Great Parlour. Lavenham Guildhall in Suffolk is of a similar age and also has a daisy-wheel, plus a mummified cat found in the walls.

2 Stone-built Bodiam Castle in Kent has protective symbols around many of the doors and windows. These were probably added when the castle was constructed. They can be difficult to spot because the exterior markings are now quite weathered and to the untrained eye they're easily confused with the mason's marks.

3 A rare type of witch-mark can easily be seen on the outer wall of the stable block at Belton

House in Lincolnshire. The star-shaped ausklis cross is more common in Eastern Europe where it's regarded as a holy sign for driving away evil spirits. No one is quite certain how these ended up on a late 17th century building near Grantham. Stables obviously needed protection as well as houses because there's a daisy wheel near a west-facing window on the stable block – now gift shop – at Canon's Ashby in Northamptonshire.

4 The witch marks at Woolsthorpe Manor are intriguing because it's just possible they were made by mathematician and alchemist Sir Isaac Newton. Newton was known for scribbling on the walls of his rooms, and the graffiti at Woolsthorpe – including a rough sketch of a post-mill – is frequently attributed to him.

5 At Thorington Hall in Essex you can sleep safely in a

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LEFT: RACHEL HALL, CENTRE: NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES / JOHN HAMMOND

MATTHEW CHAMPION



building protected by witch marks on the newel post of the main stairs. The building is rented out as a holiday cottage – though it's usually open for general viewing on Heritage Open Days. It is reputedly haunted by the spirit of a little girl in brown, so either the witch marks aren't working or the spirit is a friendly one.

6 In 2015, archaeologists surveying Knole in Kent uncovered criss-crossed lines beneath the floor of a room built to accommodate King James I – a well-known opponent of witchcraft. Unfortunately, the effort was wasted as King James never actually visited Knole.

7 At Clandon Park in Surrey, witch marks in the form of crossed lines, V and M symbols, and a five-pointed star scratched into beams and plaster and hidden behind panelling, were only discovered after the building was gutted by fire in 2015. The

building dates from the 1730s so it's interesting that these protective symbols were still in use well into the Enlightenment.

8 A very rare set of witch marks can be seen on the hearth stones of the Fleece Inn in Worcestershire. These wide circles, which appear to have been worn rather than chiselled into the stone, are painted and have been maintained by a succession of landlords. The 15th century building which started out as a farmhouse was owned by one family until it was given to the National Trust by the last of the line, Lola Taplin, in 1977. Lola was very proud of her witch marks and was photographed rubbing them with an abrasive chalky "donkey stone". If this was the traditional way the family kept them fresh, that might account for the wear. It's interesting to note that if witch marks could be chalked or painted, they may once have been even more common than they are now.

Other places to see witch marks include Tattershall castle in Lincolnshire, which has a range of mediæval graffiti, including a protective circular 'compass mark' near one of the windows. Perhaps it was felt that this unusual brick-built castle might need extra protection from the supernatural.

In some buildings the witch marks are in concealed spaces known only to the person who made them – and presumably to the evil spirits repelled by them. A collection of witch marks tucked away in the attics of The Vyne near Basingstoke can only be seen on rare behind-the-scenes house tours.

Details to help you plan your visit to all the properties mentioned are available from the National Trust website: www.nationaltrust.org.uk. Due to the spread of coronavirus, all National Trust houses, parks and gardens are currently closed. Check the website for details on future re-opening.

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