

SEEKING RITUAL IN STRANGE PLACES: DEAD CATS, OLD SHOES AND RAGGED CLOTHING. DISCOVERING CONCEALED MAGIC IN THE ANTIPODES

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ABSTRACT

A study conducted over a period of six years has revealed the existence in Australia in the period 1788 to 1935 of a ritual previously unknown in that country in which shoes, garments and dead cats were secreted in sealed voids in buildings in an apparent attempt to divert evil spiritual beings from harming the occupants of houses and other buildings. The ritual has been traced to Britain where its origins date to at least the 13th century. This study of the material culture of folk magic has underlined the importance of extending research parameters beyond the documentary record.

INTRODUCTION

Research into the material culture of folk magic in Australia has suggested that researchers who lean too heavily on the documentary record may fail to identify significant themes and events in social history. Evidence supporting this statement has emerged as a result of six years of artifact-based research focused on locating and recording deliberately concealed objects in old houses and other buildings throughout Australia.

The result has been the discovery of a previously undocumented ritual, widespread throughout Australia for some 150 years, which involved the concealment of a variety of objects within voids in houses and other buildings. These artifacts are largely considered by scholars to be talismans intended to protect people from evil spiritual beings (Evans 2010; Hoggard 2004; Merrifield 1987).

By hiding charms in voids in buildings Australia's practitioners of folk magic also ensured that their rituals would not be discovered for more than a century. The secret remained until the 21st century, despite the arrival in this country of many thousands of British people whose belief systems were infused with the supernatural.

As British folk magic scholar Owen Davies (1999: 6) has pointed out, "It is hard to believe that witchcraft accusations did not occur in the new continent and that magical practices, which were widespread in early nineteenth century urban and rural Britain, suddenly became redundant."

More than 100 separate deposits of concealed objects have been identified, recorded and photographed in Australia. Distribution is widespread throughout the country and occurs in every state. There is no apparent concentration in any locality, other than that which appears to be generated by greater population density in cities such as Sydney and Melbourne.

Some new, and to some extent controversial, conclusions have been drawn from this research despite the fact that the practice is absent from the documentary record. No one, either in the United Kingdom or Australia, has as yet found a contemporary description or explanation for the placement in building voids of some very mundane artifacts with apparent ritual associations. It is the context in which these objects are found, together with the accumulation of large numbers of identical or very similar finds, that makes them remarkable (Evans 2010).

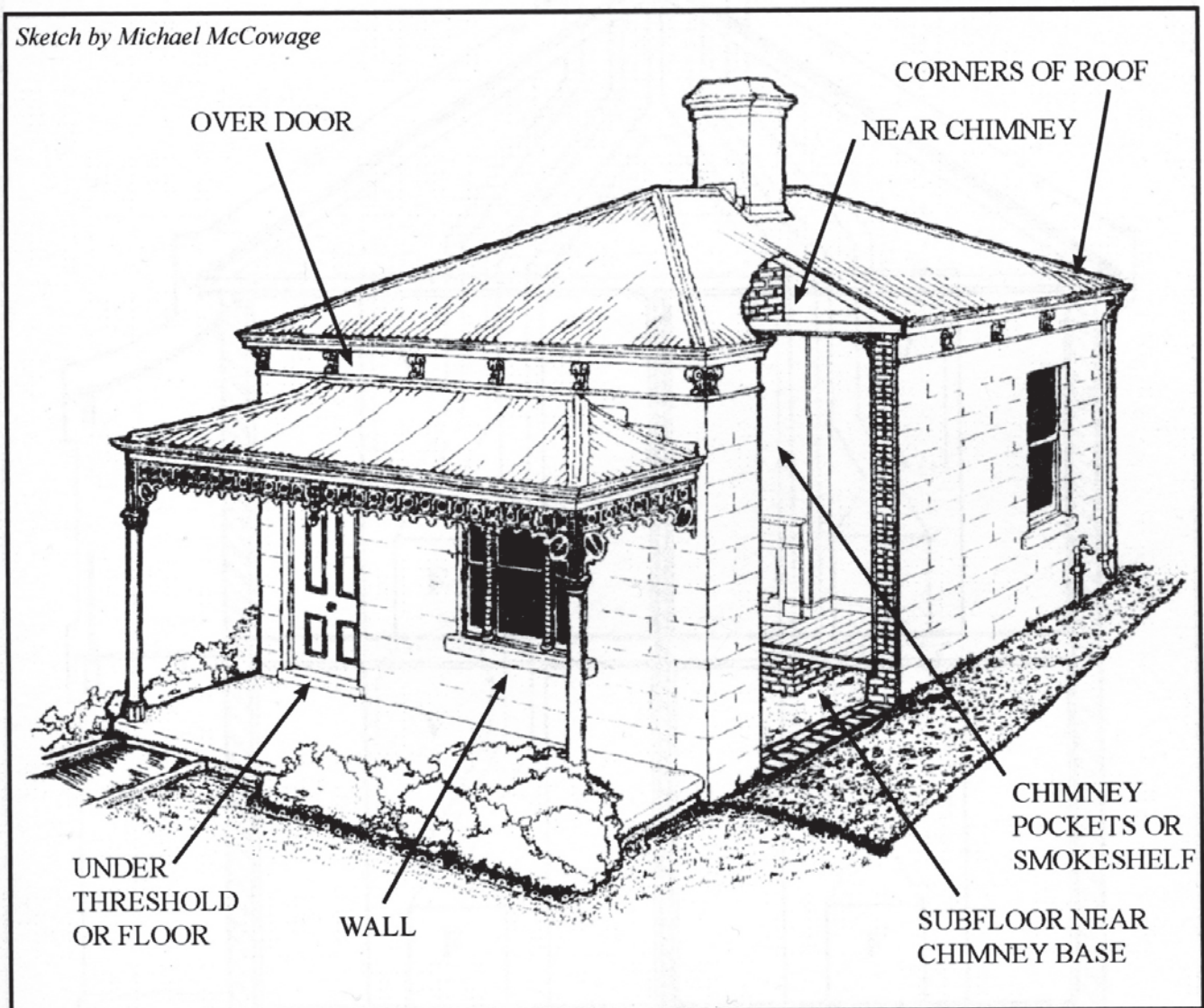


Tradesman's boots, 24 Germeine Street, Semaphore, South Australia. They were photographed in situ, adjacent to the base of a chimney serving the dining room and master bedroom. (Norbert Gross).

SIMILARITIES REVEAL THE SOURCE

Certain identifying characteristics, noted in British finds, also occur in the Australian concealments, firmly linking them to ritual traditions recorded by English researchers (Easton 2012; Hoggard 2004). For example, both British and Australian concealments are typically found at points of entry to buildings—locations which may have been thought to permit easy access by evil spiritual beings (Fowler 1911; Johnstone 1991). Of these, the most important are the fireplace, chimney flue, and hearth.

The chimney, being open to the sky, could provide swift and easy access to the very core of a house. The flue led down to the fireplace where food was prepared and where members of the household gathered around in the evening and on cold and wintry days. Other spaces on the periphery of human occupation, including doors, windows, roof cavities, and subfloor areas, have also yielded concealments (Evans 2010).



The presumed dangers posed by evil spiritual beings entering a house were the subject of a Royal warning in early 17th-century England. It came from James Charles Stuart (1566 to 1625), the king who united England and Scotland, patron of Shakespeare and instigator of the King James Bible. In his book *Daemonologie* (1604), James advised his subjects to beware of entry into their houses of the familiars of witches. These small evil beasts were said to act as agents of the Devil and to seek to do harm to people in their homes. According to the king, familiars,

“being transformed in the likenesse of a little beast or foule, ... will come and pearce through whatsoever house or Church, though all ordinarie passages be closed, by whatsoever open[ing], the aire may enter in at.” (Stuart 1597: second book, chapter four, 32).

The advice was quite clear: protect your home and family in those places where evil forces may seek to gain entry and attack you.



James Charles Stuart by Paul van Somer (Prado Museum)

The king's remarks were not necessarily a statement of a startling concept at the time. He may have been expressing views that were already widely accepted and of ancient origin. But whatever the case may be, the royal warning of dangerous spiritual forces that could enter buildings wherever the air itself passed through the structure appears to have had considerable force. *Daemonologie* was published in Edinburgh in 1597 and in London in 1604. Readers of this influential work found their beliefs recorded therein and stamped with the seal of royal endorsement.

A further warning against intrusions by evil spirits came in the early 18th century in Boulton's (1715) *Complete History of Magick, Sorcery and Witchcraft*: "If they enter as a spirit only, any place where the air can pass thro' is sufficient for their passage." This passage echoes the text in *Daemonologie* of the century before and suggests that memory of James's warning had survived. It seems King James and Boulton were doing no more than giving fresh emphasis to something that had been known and practiced in Britain and in Continental Europe for many centuries.

Apertures that could have been vulnerable to the sort of supernatural home intrusion described by King James and Boulton included such liminal spaces as doors, windows, chimneys, and roof and subfloor cavities. Roof cavities were tightly sealed against the intrusion of rain, hail, and snow but were often porous to airflow. The same applied to subfloor spaces where the passage of air was often necessary to carry away dampness from the earth. But of all the areas of weakness, none exceeded the risk posed by chimneys. These were open to the air and were thought to be extremely vulnerable to attack by demonic forces. Thus, it is significant that so many concealed objects are found in close proximity to the chimney.

Beings that could enter a house on a puff of air clearly required special precautionary measures. By placing their remarks in the context of witchcraft, King James and Boulton give us an insight into the reasoning behind concealments. The conclusion is that these artifacts were talismans designed to deflect the power of spirits, witches, and the familiars of witches.

RITUAL DEPOSIT OR RUBBISH?

The earliest recorded concealed shoes in England date from ca. 1300. Portions of them were found during renovations in Winchester Cathedral, tucked in behind the choir stalls. (Concealed Shoe Index, Northampton Museums). More than ten centuries before, Britain's Roman occupiers had practiced rituals in which shoes and a variety of other objects were placed in pits located in and around the forts and encampments with which they subdued the native peoples of Britain (Fulford 2001:199, 218).

These pits are now considered to have served a ritual function -- but on occasion were employed as repositories of rubbish. The same pit could, at different times, be the recipient of votive offerings or of objects with a protective purpose, placed deep within the earth as gifts to the gods, while on other occasions it provided a convenient dumping site for the detritus of a military camp or settlement. The result is what Fulford has described as "inevitable ambiguities" between rubbish and ritual.

Many pits contain artifacts familiar to researchers who study concealments deposited in buildings almost 1,500 years later. For example, numerous shoes were among the objects found in the wells of Trimontium, a Roman fort near the present town of Newstead on the Scottish Borders (Curle 1911). Some of these were the footwear of women and children rather than of the men who made up the great majority of the occupants of the fort. The placement of these has been described as personal votive acts that may be symbolic of a journey contemplated or carried out (Clarke 2009).




Ritual object or rubbish? A sandal from one of the pits at Trimontium. (National Museum of Scotland)

In a bias towards the footwear of children, the Trimontium finds share one of the attributes of shoe concealments in building voids in the post-Medieval period – a similarity which may provide a tentative link between the ritual practices of the Roman invaders of Britain and the concealment of shoes and other objects in the modern period.

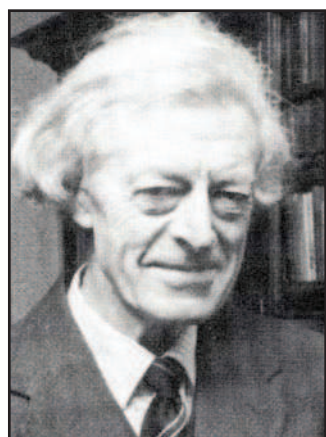
For many years, such finds were seen in isolation: dismissed as the quirks of builders who tossed their old shoe into a void before adding the bricks that sealed it in for the lifetime of the building, or the footwear of children, lost while their owners were playing games in unlikely places. The tendency of people who found these artifacts was to offer a mundane, logical reason for their placement. This need for the rational explanation stifled enquiry for a long time, but the evidence for another way of seeing the phenomenon began to accumulate. There were common characteristics to such finds and these were eventually noticed.

Several researchers in England began to suspect that there was something odd about shoes found in old buildings. The first of these was John Lea Nevinson of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. In a letter to *The Times*, published on 5 February 1934, Nevinson asked: “Is there any reason or superstition to account for the placing of old worn shoes in walls or under floors?”

<p>A SUSSEX DISCOVERY</p> <p>LADY'S SHOES OF THE TIME OF CHARLES II.</p> <p>Under the stairs in an ancient Sussex house has been found in good preservation a pair of lady's shoes of the time of Charles II. They are brownish cow-hide (now rather grey with mildew), and the distinctive straight front of the toe is only 1½in. broad, coming back 2in. with nearly parallel sides to a width of 1½in. They were fastened with straps tied with laces of white linen tape, the tongue being ornamented with four pierced holes. The heel, leather over a wooden core, rises 1½in., and, as usual at that date, the sole is continued in one piece from the toe under the instep and under the heel. The length is 10in., a modern lady's size 4.</p> <p>Similar shoes are in the Victoria and Albert, Guildhall, and London Museums, the toes of which just peeped out under the very full long skirt of a Barbara Palmer or Nell Gwynne. They were “straights,” with no difference in make between right and left shoes, although wear has differentiated them. Though the shape has not been revived, modern practice has reverted to wood-covered heels and continuous soles.</p>		<p>MEN'S STRAIGHTS</p> <p>TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES</p> <p>Sir,—The large collection of shoes in the Victoria and Albert Museum shows the change from the pointed and shaped shoes of the fifteenth century and earlier to the broad or square-toed “straights” of the early sixteenth century. Shakespeare's own time is represented by a pair of slippers of about 1600 lent to this museum by Sir Harry Verney; these “will equally admit either foot,” and not betray haste.</p> <p>In the seventeenth century men's and women's shoes and slippers seem without exception to be straights. Men's shoes of the eighteenth century are rare, and though two late pairs in this museum are rights and lefts, straights were common, if not universal, in Dr. Johnson's time. Evidence for this is supplied by the shoes of the effigy of Edmund Duke of Buckingham (d. 1735) in Westminster Abbey and the plate in Diderot's <i>Encyclopédie</i> (1762-72).</p> <p>A surprising fact is that women's shoes, which had pointed toes from at least as early as 1700, show no shaping at all before 1850. With reference to the discovery in Sussex, is there any reason or superstition to account for the placing of old worn shoes (usually women's) in walls or under floors?</p> <p>Yours faithfully, J. L. NEVINSON. Department of Textiles, Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, S.W.7.</p>
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John Lea Nevinson and his letters to *The Times*, 23/1/1934 and 5/2/1934. Nevinson appears to have been the first person to suspect that shoes were concealed in buildings as part of a superstitious practice. His portrait is in the collection of the Society of Antiquaries, London. (*News Ltd and Society of Antiquaries*).

Nothing further came of Nevinson's enquiry and it was to be twenty years before another researcher questioned finds of shoes and other objects in old houses. F. K. Annable, curator of the museum at Devizes, Wiltshire, wrote to *Folklore* in 1955 to report the discovery of a deposit of shoes and other artifacts in Great Porch House, Monday Market Street, Devizes, Wiltshire. The deposit appeared to have been built up over no less than three centuries:



F.K. Annable, curator of the museum at Devizes, Wiltshire. (*Devizes Museum*).

“Four shoes, one of late seventeenth-century date, the other three, of which one had belonged to a child in arms, being early nineteenth century. There were also fragments of two pottery bowls, and a third, though also broken, was complete, the three dating respectively to late seventeenth, late eighteenth, and mid-nineteenth centuries. Finally to complete the deposit were fragments of an eighteenth-century clay pipe, a wine glass stem of the late eighteenth-century, a small iron file, broken at the tip, and the remains of what looks like a hat box along with a small length of corduroy cloth” (Annable 66.2, 6/1955, 304).



The shoes from Great Porch House, Devizes. (*Devizes Museum*).

Annable (1955) reported other finds of shoes and garments and became the first person to use the term “ritual” to describe this custom.

But there were no responses to his enquiry. It was not until 1957 that June Swann, curator of the boot and shoe collection at Northampton Museums and Galleries in Northampton, England, noted that shoes were being brought into the Museum after being found in odd places in old houses.

Swann began to suspect that superstition was at work but recorded that people who found the objects had a wonderful range of theories for their location: “You should read the range of ‘explanations’ I record, from large items that slipped through cracks between floorboards, boy chimney-sweeps losing their shoes, cats getting stuck, not to mention the multiple objects carried by mice and rats.” (Personal communication 27/10/09).

In about 1958, Swann began to record the finds reported to her on cards that eventually formed Northampton Museum’s Concealed Shoe Index. The Index continues to this day with regular additions contributed by Swann’s successors at the Museum and by Swann herself, whose interest in shoes and shoe concealments has never abated. Swann was not aware of Annable’s letter to *Folklore* until very recently. Swann knew Nevinson but cannot recall when she became aware of his letter to *The Times*.

The first book to describe ritual concealments was *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (Merrifield 1987). Since then, little new work has been done. Brian Hoggard, an independent researcher, has located many finds of concealed objects, particularly in the English Midlands near his base in Worcester (Hoggard 2004). Timothy Easton, also working independently from his home near Woodbridge in Suffolk, has located and recorded many finds in East Anglia (Easton 1988, 1999).



June Swann, MBE

TRANSPORTED TO THE ANTIPODES

Australian research on concealments has opened a new window on the country’s history as well as casting new light on British concealments (Evans 2010). Concealments made by identifiable emigrants to Australia can readily be used to verify that the practice was known in the area of Britain from whence they came.

But there are other facts relating to the practice that can be deduced from the finds made so far in Australia. A logical inference drawn from the extremely widespread nature of concealments in Australia, with deposits found in widely separated cities, towns, and rural areas of the country at a time when communication within and between the Colonies was limited, is that this was a ritual with a long history.

Dissemination throughout Britain, possibly over a period of many centuries, must have taken place before people made the journey to Australia; the ritual was carried to this new world as part of their cultural baggage. It appears that a powerful oral tradition was at work and that both the need for concealments and the type of objects to be concealed were known to a great many people.



Splashed with lime mortar and worn to destruction, are these the boots of a workman who helped build the house in Russell Street, Bathurst, NSW, where they were found under the floor?

In Australia, British emigrants scattered throughout the colonies of New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, planting the ritual wherever they settled. Long before the internet, telephone, or radio, people knew about this custom and carried it out with precision in remote and distant corners of a continent with an area approaching three million square miles. The shoes and other objects they placed in voids in their houses and other buildings are still being found today. Renovations to old houses are the most common means of discovery. Lifting a decayed floor, taking down an unwanted chimney, or replacing roofing often brings these artifacts into the light of day for the first time in a century or more.

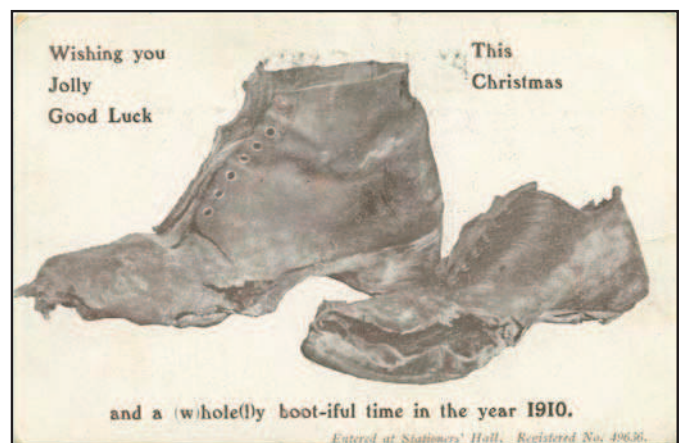


Above left, roof slaters at work at Elizabeth Bay House, Sydney, NSW, as recorded in the Sydney Morning Herald, 18 July, 1935. These men were perhaps responsible for the placement in the roof cavity of a pair of tan leather Oxford shoes of circa 1930. (John Fairfax Limited and Historic Houses Trust of NSW)

Additionally, Australian concealments adhere to the contextual rules for the placement of objects observed in British deposits. Close examination of numerous concealment sites in Australia has indicated that many of the objects placed there had been concealed by or with the knowledge of building tradesmen. Closing the voids where these artifacts are found was the task of carpenters, bricklayers, stonemasons, plasterers, and roof slaters. But if this ritual began as a secret tradition of the building trades it had long since escaped into the community at large (Evans 2010).

One of the several enigmas surrounding this practice is that it was widely known but also highly secret. Hoggard (2004) states that secrecy is of an indication of magic practices: “it can be inferred by the very existence of these finds that magic of one kind or another was a significant component in the lives of those who concealed these items.” In 1973, folklorist Margaret Baker (1982; letter to Northampton Museums) recorded the account of Bill Brown of Stockleigh Pomeroy, Devon, in which he recalled his father finding part of a boot in a wall at two old ruined cottages. Attempts by Brown to get his very reluctant father to tell him why the object was there produced the remark that it was “something to do with witching and that it was ‘ill-wished.’”

Apart from several early 20th century postcards in which old shoes were presented as “lucky” (Manning, 2012; Evans 2010), thus inverting the intent from the contentious practice of magic into an everyday and innocent purpose, and the reminiscences of an old man from Devon, nothing has so far been found in the contemporary documentary record. The lack of a paper trail resulted in historians failing to notice a significant phenomenon in Australian social history.

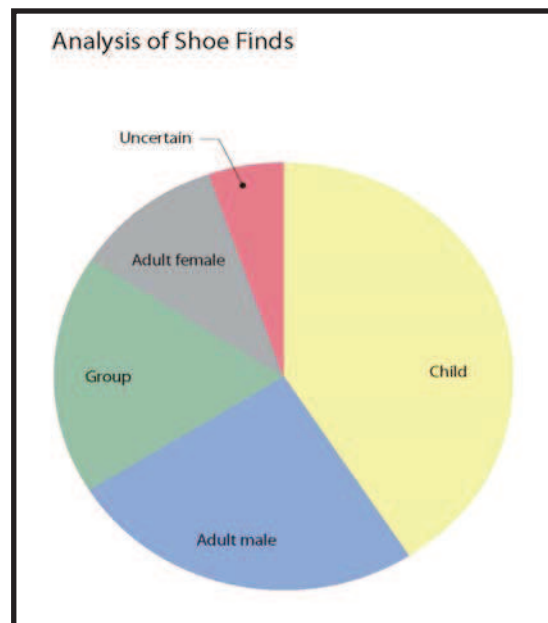


The potential difficulties of suggesting that an object could guard against evil spirits was tackled by inverting the statement. It was perfectly acceptable to say that something brought good luck. This 1909 postcard thus constitutes an admission and acknowledgement of an ancient ritual practice, never before openly discussed. (Northampton Museum and Art Gallery).

It was not until the discovery of a few shoes in unusual locations in Australian buildings that comparisons were made with similar finds in England. Once the pursuit was underway it proved remarkably easy to find concealed shoes, garments, cats, and other artifacts in buildings throughout Australia.

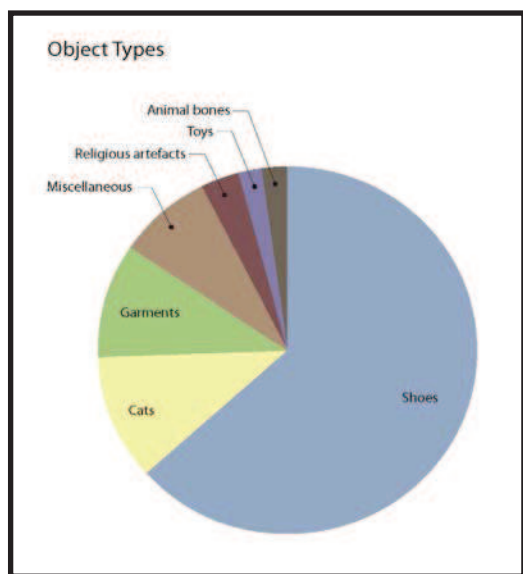
Of the 95 shoe sites examined in the course of this research, the shoes of children or young people were the most common. The figures are as follows:

Adult male	24
Adult female	10
Children	39
Uncertain	5
Groups	17



Those finds recorded as groups included both pairs and the footwear of more than one person. These included finds which appeared to consist of the footwear of every person in the household at a certain point in time. The largest group find came from the Tasmanian Midlands where 38 shoes and boots were found in an early 19th century house.

Other sites examined contained a variety of objects. Of these the majority contained cats with garments not far behind. The details are as follows:



Cats	17
Garments	12
Religious artifacts (marble bible, bible, rosaries)	5
Animal bones	3
Toys	3
Miscellaneous*	12

* Parasol, book covers, leather leggings, bottles, teaspoon, shoe last, cotton reels, gunpowder flask, coins, cutlery, baby powder tin, horseshoe, printed matter.

A WORLD FILLED WITH MYSTERY

Understanding why such objects would be concealed in buildings, presumably placed to decoy or deter evil spirits, requires an adjustment of the 21st-century mindset. This practice takes us back to a period before more than a very few people understood the way in which the world worked. The widespread distribution of almanacs throughout Australia existed to meet the demand for information on astrology, folklore and the supernatural, suggesting that these had as much standing in the broader community as the infant study of science (Perkins 1996, 2001).

Since this is a ritual without a written record, conclusions can be drawn only from interpretation of the artifacts. Mute though they are, much can be taken from their condition, age, type and the context in which they are found.



Australia's largest cache of concealed objects, found in an attic bedroom and other locations at Antill Ponds, 13 km north of Oatlands in the Tasmanian Midlands. Alan and Linda Cooper display the 38 boots and shoes, two hats and other objects found in the house. The remains of two parasols can be seen at the bottom of the photograph.

All of the concealed shoes and garments found in Australia were worn, many of them to the very edge of destruction. Shoes in particular exhibit wear patterns that are not seen today. This speaks of a period in which poverty was widespread and prosperity was uncommon. It also suggests that wear produced qualities that were useful in terms of the purpose behind the concealment. The efficacy of the concealed object may have been a function of its association with a particular person in the household. Thus, new and unworn shoes (not so far found in Australian concealments) were too expensive to be wasted in a building void and, more importantly, would not work on the evil beings that they were intended to deceive. New shoes had no association with a person.



A relic from the penal settlement at Moreton Bay, Queensland, this fragment of a shoe was found in the roof structure of the convict station's commissariat building during alterations in 1913. The image at left, the upper side of the sole, shows the top of hobnails and the polish imparted by the foot of the wearer. At right, the bottom of the sole reveals numerous hobnails and heel and toe irons made by a blacksmith.

This shoe is of a type normally used in the 19th century in heavy, hard work: felling trees, breaking stone or working in a quarry. Its length, 220mm, suggests that this shoe was worn by a child, perhaps 15 years or less old. The type of shoe and its condition suggest that its wearer was employed in backbreaking labour. The leather upper has been carefully removed, possibly salvaged to repair other footwear.

Several other characteristics of Australian concealed shoes provide scope for speculative interpretation. A significantly large number of them are the footwear of children or young people (Evans 2010). Is this a function of a period when larger families were the rule, or was there a preference for the shoes of children, thus harnessing the power of the good and the innocent to combat evil?



A PACT WITH UNKNOWN SPIRITUAL FORCES

Why do so many concealments consist of a single shoe? Where did its mate go? Swann (1996) reported a conversation in a village in England in which she was told that “one goes to fire, one goes to water.” Thus, the chimney/fireplace and perhaps the household well received the separated shoes of an old and worn pair. Not enough domestic wells have survived in Australia to explore this possibility.

Another possibility is that the missing shoe might also have formed the other half of a contract (Chapman 2000). This theory has been related to the Roman custom of *tessera hospitalis*, in which halves of an object were kept by two friends, family members or the parties to an agreement or a commitment as a token of their bond.

Applying this theory to the concealment of shoes raises an intriguing question: if the persons who made the concealment believed that they were thus entering into a contractual arrangement, with whom did they understand the pact was made? How was the other shoe dealt with? This theory implies an arrangement with supernatural and perhaps demonic forces, thus transforming what appears to be mere folk magic into something of a much darker hue.

DEATHS IN THE FAMILY

What drove people to practice magic in 19th-century Australia? The answer to the question may lie with the toll of child mortality that was part of life in that period. Cemeteries used in that century are dotted with the graves of infants and young children, many of them victims of illnesses that are no longer a threat to life. Research into the background of families in houses where concealments were made has suggested that there was



A charm cluster? Objects from beneath the kitchen floor, 18 Jessie Street, Richmond, Victoria. Carpenters who nailed down the kitchen floor would have been aware of this deposit.

a tendency to turn to magic when religion was seen to fail to provide protection. Magic placed the power of the universe in the hands of ordinary people. According to Godbeer (1992):

“Magical skill enables people to harness supernatural power and use it for their own purposes: they can predict the future, protect themselves against harm, heal the sick, and strike down their enemies. Religious belief assumes the existence of a supernatural authority (usually personified) that controls the world according to its own will; people can attempt to influence this divine power through prayer and other devotional exercises, but there is no guarantee that their desires will be fulfilled or their requests granted.”

Betz (1996) describes magic as:

“the art that makes people who practice it feel better rather than worse, that provides the illusion of security to the insecure, the feeling of help to the helpless, and the comfort of hope to the hopeless.”



The house of Elizabeth and George Hurley in Sydney's Rocks district. The items found in this house were in the roof cavity, close to the rain-water head in the top right-hand corner of this photograph.

A possible example of the way in which misfortune could prompt a religious person to turn to magic is provided by the story of the children of George and Elizabeth Hurley who lived at No. 37 Lower Fort Street in the Sydney waterfront suburb of Dawes Point between 1863 and the 1870s. He is perhaps the George Hurley, born at Alveston in Warwickshire, England, in 1823 and who married a Mary Ann (surname unknown) at Leaming or Leamington, Warwickshire, in 1848. They appear to have arrived in Sydney ca. 1850. George established himself in the commercial life of Sydney and at various times conducted a wholesale drapery store, a fancy goods shop, and acted as an auctioneer and estate agent. (*The Empire*, 13 March 1851, 2; Greville 1872, unpaginated; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1879, 9). He was for some years an alderman of Sydney City Council (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 December 1864, 7). He was clearly a civic-minded citizen and as such was a member of the laity that supported the Catholic Church in Sydney. He was one of a number of prominent businessmen on a committee formed under Church auspices to raise money for the completion of St Mary's Cathedral (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September 1859, 5).

Vincent (1989) makes it clear that although literacy was steadily increasing in the period in which the Hurleys lived, belief in magic and the supernatural was still rife at this time. While around half of the population of England could read and write, superstitious practices covering all aspects of the uncertainties of life still held

fast among a great many people. The majority of these related to health and the preservation of life.

Cures associated with whooping cough, to provide a few examples, included passing the afflicted child three times before breakfast under a forked blackberry bush, or nine times under the belly and over the back of a three-year-old donkey, carrying it through the smoke of a brick kiln or making the child wear a string with nine knots, a caterpillar in a bag, or a spider in a nutshell (Vincent 1989). There were a great many other equally efficacious remedies. It would have been extremely unlikely if Hurley and his wife had arrived in New South Wales with no knowledge of traditional English magical practices of one kind or another.

When they moved into the house in Lower Fort Street, Hurley's wife had previously given birth to six children, of whom three had died in infancy. This was not an unusual story of family life in the 19th century. The risk of death, especially of children, was ever-present. This is not to diminish the pain and grief of this family by saying that their loss was ordinary or commonplace, but to point out that they moved to Lower Fort Street against a background of concern for the survival of their children. The fear of further infant deaths must have been very much on their minds. A cough, a chill, a runny nose, a thorn, an infected wound or any one of a number of common conditions that barely cause a ripple today could mark the commencement of a decline that might take a child from this world.

The house, poised at the top of a rocky prominence overlooking the harbor and with water views to the east and the west, was much more exposed to the elements and the sky than their previous residence in the busy commercial hub of 1850s Sydney. Concealing personal objects in a building void at the top of the house to decoy evil away from their children, at a time when this was widely believed to be an effective prophylactic against harm, may have given the Hurleys an increased sense of security and comfort, knowing that they had done all they could to provide for the safety of their family.

The objects found in the roof cavity of the Hurley house during the course of building renovations in 2003 consisted of an ankle boot for a small child dating from ca. 1830 to 1840, and half of a woman's lace collar in a style popular from 1850 to 1865. The boot is well made and is of woolen fabric with a toecap of black leather or kid. Three loops, trimmed with a fabric that may once have been green, have holes through which faceted buttons of black Bohemian glass provided fastening over the small foot inside. Like other concealed shoes found in Australia and elsewhere, this artifact is well worn and appears have been used by more than one child. Concealment is the ultimate end use for an old shoe, which in the process of repeated family connections, may have been considered as having accumulated considerable spiritual power (Evans 2010).



A child's three-button ankle boot, circa 1830 – 1840 from the roof cavity at 37 Lower Fort Street, Dawes Point, Sydney. 130mm.

ORIGINS OF CAT MAGIC

The practice of concealing cats in voids in buildings is known to have taken place in Britain and elsewhere in Europe for at least five centuries (Schad 2005). Domestic cats originated from an ancestral wild species, *Felis silvestris*, the European and African wild cat. The domestic cat is now considered a separate species, identified as *Felis catus*. In appearance, domestic cats are similar to their wild relatives, and many of their behaviors such as hunting and other activity patterns remain essentially unchanged from their ancestral form.

Cats were domesticated in the Near East by about 9,000 years ago (Driscoll et al. 2007). The domestic cat was part of everyday life in Egypt around 2000 B.C. As a revered animal and one very important to Egyptian society and religion, the cat was afforded the same mummification after death as humans (Evans 2010). It has been theorized that the Romans introduced the domestic cat to Britain by A.D. 300, possibly with knowledge of the religious and magical status of the animals in the Egyptian society from which they had come (BBC Nature online), but no academic studies of this possibility have yet been done. Information about the arrival of cats in the British Isles is thus inconclusive (Evans 2010).

Cat bones found in various locations in Britain may be those of the native wild cat rather than the introduced domestic animal. The bones of cats found within the wall structure of Broch Howe, in Orkney, Scotland, appear to have been placed there during its construction in the period between the 1st and 4th centuries A.D. Smith and Hodgson (1994) record the finds as possible ritual depositions:

“It is possible that the bodies of felines were deliberately buried to ‘act’ against rodents. Certainly the large numbers of small mammals in this phase may have forced the human inhabitants to resort to any means available to be rid of the nuisance.”

Cats have long been associated with magic and with witches (Merrifield 1987). Their aloof and somewhat otherworldly nature, as well as the fact that they roamed about during the night when witches and evil spirits were thought to be at large, gave them a reputation that resulted in the death of a great many cats (Merrifield 1994; Schad 2005). They were believed to be the familiars of witches, or to be witches masquerading in animal form, and to act on their command to carry out evil missions against humanity (Schad 2005). A familiar was a creature such as a cat, rodent, or insect that could gain easy and unnoticed entry to a house, there to do the witch's evil bidding. Cats were also used in magic rituals (Merrifield 1994).



The Her Majesty's Theatre cat, Ballarat, Victoria, with its accompanying rats.

It was hardly to be expected that a traditional cultural practice carried out in Europe from at least as early as the 13th century would make its way to Australia, but the fact that this custom traveled around the world became apparent soon after intensive research began here in 2004. The first cat concealment on record was found at *Her Majesty's Theatre*, Ballarat, Victoria, during renovations in the 1990s. The theatre was built in 1875 and remodeled in 1898.

The most recent concealments of cats so far known took place in two adjacent terrace houses in Miller's Point, Sydney, about 1904, or more than 450 years after cat finds recorded in Germany (Schad 2005). The earliest Australian finds that are dateable come from the Primitive Methodist Church of 1863 at Woodchester, South Australia, and from the 1866 Anglican rectory at Birregurra, Victoria.

Concealed cats in both Australia and in the British Isles may be "posed" so that they appear about to spring (Merrifield 1994), as in the case of the cat found by Rob Thomas underneath the family home at 55 Upton Street, Launceston, Tasmania, some years ago. The animal was described as:

"lying on its side, frozen in a very aggressive, quite ferocious pose. It had its mouth open with one paw up. It was as if it was about to kill something and had been frozen in time" (Thomas 2005, pers. comm.).

Concealed cats found in the British Isles sometimes have a dead mouse in their mouth (Merrifield 1994). The cat found beneath *Her Majesty's Theatre* was accompanied by a number of rats. Both the cat and its companions can be seen in a display mounted in the foyer of the theatre. Concealed cats are found in much the same locations as shoes. To date, however, while there are no records of cat concealments within the structure of a chimney many have been found in close proximity to chimneys, either in the roof cavity or under the ground floor.

Beneath a suspended hearth slab is a favored spot, but cats are also found under front or rear doors where they may have been posted as guardians of the entrances to a house. In recording finds of cats as concealments, those where access was possible to a live animal were disregarded (Evans 2010).

Because there is no contemporary documentary explanation of the rules relating to concealments, researchers can only speculate on the reason for the choice of cats over shoes when concealments were being planned. While it is possible that both were intended to serve much the same purpose cats may have been used in situations where more personal objects were not available. Tradesmen working on buildings where they were not aware of the identity of the future occupants, in rural areas where the owners were not on site, or in cases where they felt the owners would not be willing to provide shoes or other items for concealment, may have fallen back on the use of a cat.

The cat found at *Glengallan Homestead*, near Warwick in Queensland, may be a case in point. In this example, tradesmen were working at a location that was then quite remote with an employer who was a wealthy landowner with a family that was not accessible to the builders for social and geographical reasons.

By concealing a cat under the floor of the drawing room at *Glengallan* the obligation of the workmen to provide protection would have been fulfilled without the knowledge or cooperation of the future occupants of the house (Evans 2010).



Glengallan (State Library of Queensland).

Unlike shoes, concealed cats can provide very little information to assist the researcher. Shoes can be dated but cats, as enigmatic in death as in life, tell us very little. There is, it appears, no way to date cat concealments other than by reference to the date of construction of the house or building in which they are found. This provides the earliest possible date for concealment but nothing more.

There may be information contained within the structure of a building that suggests concealment at some time after the construction period. It is usually easy to tell if floorboards have been taken up. A find close to a flooring patch may be indicative of a concealment taking place some time after construction. But there is no way of accurately dating this or other forms of surface disturbance to walls, floors or brickwork.

None of the known Australian cat concealments appears to have occurred while the animal was alive; indications are that the opposite was the case. Cat corpses found to date seem to have been carefully positioned and some may have been posed in an apparently watchful state. But more research is required on concealed cats in order to answer the following questions:

- How were they killed? X-ray examination of the bodies of concealed cats in Austria has revealed broken necks (Schad 2005). The same practice may have been in use in Australia but this has yet to be established. Drowning is another possibility.
- Were chemicals used to preserve the body? There is no information available on this. On balance, it appears that preservation was not part of the process.

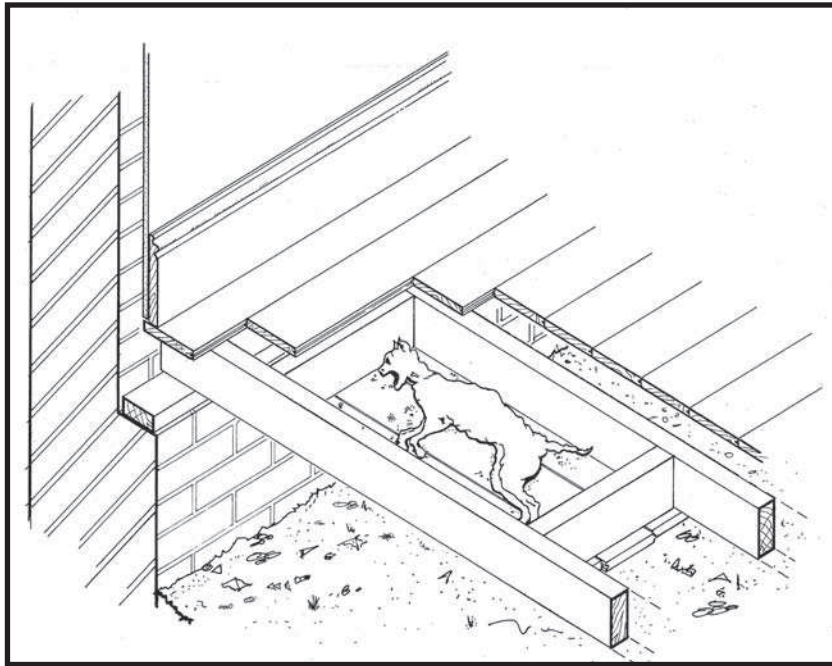
In the case of the cats concealed in adjoining houses in Argyle Place, in Sydney's Miller's Point, there is a glimpse of the possible reasoning behind the choice of these animals. Of the row of six shop-fronted terraced houses on the site, two are known to have contained concealed cats. While the date of initial construction is not known, the group of houses received a makeover around 1906, emerging with a distinct Arts and Crafts appearance in a 1907 photograph. The site of these finds is 500 m from the place where Sydney's plague epidemic of 1900 was first detected. The unfortunate victim was a 35-year-old van driver named Arthur Payne whose house at 10 Ferry Lane, Miller's Point, was swiftly guarded by police. Payne, his wife and three children, a servant, and a visitor were shunted off to the Quarantine Station at North Head (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 January 1900:5). The plague triggered a major Government response and resulted in the compulsory acquisition of properties and numerous demolitions within the worst-affected zone.

It was known at the time that rats and mice were carriers of the bubonic plague. Fleas that live on these animals act as vectors and transfer the infection from the rodents to humans. Teams of rat-catchers fanned out over the city, concentrating their activities on the slum areas where rats were most numerous. More than 44,000 rats were dispatched by the time the program was concluded. The human toll was also significant. Between 19 January and 9 August 1900, 303 people contracted the disease. Of these, 103 died. With a one-in-three chance of dying if you contracted the disease, it would be understandable if the plague sparked deep-seated fear of domestic rat infestations. Cases of the plague occurred in Sydney and other maritime cities around Australia for many years afterwards. (Kelly 1978).

The Millers Point cat concealments took place at a time when fear of the plague was still very strong in Sydney. The proximity of the Argyle Place houses where the cats were concealed to the plague's ground zero is noted. Particular care was taken with the cat placed under the floor at No. 10 Argyle Place. It was in a purpose-built box made by fixing floorboards to the bottom of the floor joists. The kitchen floorboards acted as a lid to the box. Of the other dwellings in the group, one was extensively renovated by speculators who cannot now be contacted and the remaining buildings have not been examined for subfloor or other concealments.



The Sydney rat-catchers and their catch of the day, 17/07/1900. (State Records NSW).



The cat under the kitchen floor, 10 Argyle Place, Miller's Point, New South Wales. (Michael McCowage).

The outbreak of plague within close proximity to these houses, both geographically and temporally, raises the possibility that there was a purpose behind the concealment of cats in renovated buildings so close to the site of the original infection. The connection of rats to evil spirits has long been known. Beliefs about rats as harbingers of evil and omens of death were recorded in Worcestershire in 1909 (Cowdell 2009), thus, there was good reason to see them in this light in Sydney in the first years of the 20th century. Merrifield (1987) notes that rats were prime suspects in the conflict between humans and evil spiritual forces:

“The great obsession of the 17th century was with witchcraft, and witches were supposed to work their evil by means of familiar spirits that often took the form of rats or mice.”

Merrifield recorded additional thoughts on cat concealments in an unpublished manuscript for a book planned to be a cooperative effort with Swann and Easton. This project was terminated by Merrifield's death in 1995. In his incomplete manuscript he wrote:

“Animal sacrifice survived into the post-mediaeval period as a protective device, and the dried bodies of cats are often found in roofs and chimneypieces. Sometimes they have been set up after death holding rats or mice in hidden places, and rationalised as deterrents to vermin. The original purpose, however, is likely to have been deterrence of the witch's familiars, which often took the form of rats, mice or birds” (Merrifield 1994).

The discovery of one cat close to the site of the Sydney plague outbreak might be overlooked as mere coincidence but the second cat, placed on a specially constructed platform in an adjoining house, carries the story further. This was a concealment with intent, made at a time when fear of the disease continued to grip the residents of Sydney. These concealments took place in a period when ancient beliefs may have overlapped with new scientific understanding. Both superstition and science placed the blame for the plague squarely on the rats that infested the slums of Sydney. It is possible that the cats were chosen and concealed for their supposed ability to function in the underworld and, perhaps, to deal with the diabolical forces that may have been considered to be instrumental in the spread of the plague.

Lingering fears of the underworld as a source of evil may have influenced the precautions taken by either the builders or the occupants of the houses in question. The Miller's Point finds take cat concealments in this country into the 20th century and suggest the survival in post-Federation Australia of mediaeval beliefs in dark spiritual forces (Evans 2010).

CLOTHED WITH MAGIC

Australian finds of garments of various types totaled twelve. These consisted of a variety of artifacts ranging from half a woman's lace collar in an 1830s house in Dawes Point, New South Wales, and a straw hat in an early 19th-century house at Antill Ponds in the Midlands of Tasmania, to convict shirts from Sydney and Granton, Tasmania, two pairs of trousers in a lighthouse at Geraldton, Western Australia, and a sailor's cap found within the walls of a community hall at Goulburn, New South Wales. Other finds included a convict jacket from the old Port Arthur Commissariat at Taranna, Tasmania, and a waistcoat of c. 1830 discovered in



Above, one of the three convict shirts known to have survived. All were concealed within the buildings where they were found. This is one of two shirts found at Hyde Park Barracks, Sydney. Top right, the sailor's cap found inside the wall of a community hall at Goulburn, New South Wales. Above, a waistcoat of circa 1835 from The Good Woman Inn, Hobart, Tasmania. (Historic Houses Trust of NSW; Goulburn War Memorial Museum; author).

the roof cavity of the former *Good Woman Inn*, Hobart. Gloves were found beneath the floor of a house at Lindisfarne, Tasmania, and St Mary's Cathedral, Perth.

There is a possibility that the baby's bonnet and embroidery pattern found in a box beneath the floor of a house at Blackheath, New South Wales, are associated with child deaths. The house was owned for a time in the early 20th century by Alexander and Winifred Wilson, who were married in the Sydney suburb of Woollahra in 1912. In the small local cemetery on the outskirts of Blackheath a tombstone records the deaths of two infants, born to Winifred Wilson, in 1914 and 1920, respectively. The death of "Baby Wilson," who was buried before christening, is not recorded by the New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, so the likelihood is that this was the death of a new-born infant and considered, officially at least, as not of sufficient matter to place in the registry. A tiny grave adjacent to the headstone may be that of this child. The other death, that of Marjorie Euphemia Wilson, took place when she was 15 months old and is duly officially noted. One other concealment (previously noted), at 37 Lower Fort Street, Dawes Point, New South Wales, appears to be associated with child mortality (Evans 2010).



The boot of a small child, from the subfloor area of Lott's Cottage, York, Western Australia. (York Heritage Museum).

The role of family deaths, not necessarily those of children, in precipitating the concealment of protective objects requires further investigation. This avenue of enquiry has been stimulated by preliminary research into the history of an early boot found under the kitchen floor of Lott's Cottage, York, Western Australia. The boot, that of a small child, and dated to c. 1811 to 1815, appears to have been concealed many years after manufacture. European settlers occupied Western Australia from 1829, reaching the site of York not long afterwards. John Lott arrived in the Colony in 1837 and settled in York shortly afterwards where he married Margaret Kelly in 1842. Of the 10 children they had in the following 20 years, four were dead, either through illness or accident, before 1890. The cottage in which the boot was found, located in Northam Road on the outskirts of York, dates from the 1850s.

The boot, therefore, was concealed at least 30 years after it was made. Its retention long after use, a period in which it was kept in near-perfect condition, indicates strong family and sentimental associations. If perceived as a powerful family talisman it may have been called into play following the string of deaths that occurred among the Lott children. These included those of James, aged two, in 1857, George in 1885, Edward in 1886, and Ellen in 1888 (Evans 2010). At least one other researcher has arrived at much the same conclusion in regard to a possible link between concealments and the death of children and other family members (Eastop 2001). The connection to child mortality is suggested in the following description of the discovery of various artifacts, including a baby's cap of ca. 1740 to 1770, in a wall cavity at 26/26a East St. Helen's Street, Abingdon, Oxfordshire: "The presence of the baby's cap is significant because deliberately concealed garments are often children's clothing. This leads to speculation that such garments may have been hidden to protect the household against infant deaths and/or to promote fertility/fecundity" (Eastop 2001). The promotion of fertility, if indeed this is a function of such concealments, appears to suggest an anticipated connection between the object and the objective, imparting a metaphoric underpinning to the practice.



Above, child's jacket of circa 1920 from a house at Cessnock, New South Wales. Right, boy's trousers of circa 1870 from the lighthouse at Geraldton, Western Australia. (Author; Geraldton Historical Society).

Other caches containing the clothing of children have been found in Australia. These include one of the pairs of trousers in the lighthouse at Geraldton, Western Australia (referred to previously) and the young boy's coat from Cessnock, New South Wales. As with shoes, concealed garments found to date are in very poor condition: worn, dirty, ragged and, as in the case of the waistcoat from the *Good Woman Inn*, lacking part of their substance. The waistcoat has had the black silk from its front cut away. While this may have been a matter of not wishing to waste black silk, or perhaps a contractual matter between the person who made the concealment and another, unidentified party, only half of the silk on this garment was preserved. Taking all of it may have rendered the charm ineffective.

The condition of concealed garments can mitigate against their recognition when they are found by people, often builders, who may be unaware of their purpose. The waistcoat in the roof of the *Good Woman Inn* and the convict garment in the Port Arthur Commissariat at Taranna were both almost condemned as old rags.

There are correspondences between the places in buildings where concealed shoes and concealed garments are found. The exception, very probably for entirely logical reasons, is that concealed garments are not found in chimney flues. It is notable that all of the confirmed convict garments in public collections survived because they were concealed in the buildings where they were found.

Significant finds of concealed convict garments include the shirts from *Hyde Park Barracks*, Sydney, and from the supervisor's cottage at Granton, Tasmania, and the waistcoat from the Port Arthur Commissariat. Suspected or possible concealed convict shoes have come from the Moreton Bay Commissariat, Brisbane, and the cottage at Granton (Evans 2010). Commissariats were located at convict stations and were used for the storage and distribution of everything needed to conduct a penal settlement.

CONCLUSION

This research has revealed the existence in Australia of a hitherto unknown ritual which originated in Britain at least seven centuries ago. Its purpose appears to have been to protect the occupants of houses from evil spiritual forces. The same ritual was also employed to provide protection for the occupants of a variety of other buildings and structures, both private and public, in the period from the commencement of European settlement in Australia until the 1930s.

The objects concealed in voids include shoes, garments, cats and a variety of domestic artifacts and utensils. Objects concealed as part of this ritual are now being extracted from the dark and silent voids in which they have spent a great many years and are beginning to cast new light on the hopes and fears of Australians in the period 1788 to c. 1935. Intensive research concentrated on the occupants of a number of houses in this study has produced evidence of infant and child mortality associated with the concealment of objects. A protective intent is therefore suggested.

The material culture of folk magic has opened a window on the comparatively recent past and provided a useful tool for new avenues of historical enquiry.

In addition to providing a unique record of the footwear of Australians in the period before circa 1935, the ritual described here has significant ramifications for social history. Garments and footwear contained in caches discovered throughout Australia reveal both the poverty in which many people lived but also the dread that was part of everyday life before modern medicine. In addition, the preservation of the small number of convict garments that survived from Australia's period as a destination for British criminals can now be attributed to a ritual whose origins are both ancient and which still remain cloaked in mystery.

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