

## Witches, Black Cats and Daisy Wheels

Notes: David Gibbs Photos: Alan Keene

In the spring of 2012, renovation work being carried out in a village cottage uncovered a set of interesting wall markings.

The cottage is in Lower Street, close by the Swann Inn. Of the three shown alongside, it's the one on the right.



It's believed that at one time these three cottages comprised just one property. Evidence of extensive alterations is readily discernable in the external stonework. The markings were found when old plaster was cut away from the reveals of the large window at the front of the cottage.



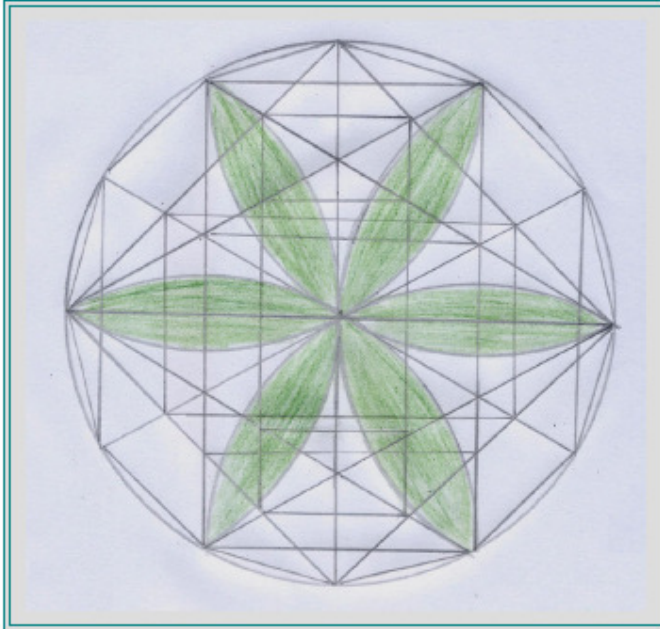


One of the more distinct marks is shown in this photo, the initials RD 1766. Exactly who RD was is not known but it could have been the owner of the property, or a tenant, or maybe a builder/craftsmen working on the property. To the right of RD 1766, the name Pitcher is discernable. Research carried out some years ago by the late Queenie Dodge, a local lady with a keen interest in the history of the village and whose papers are

held by the Crewkerne Heritage Centre, seem to suggest that the name might well be that of William Pitcher who was a tobacco pipe maker. Queenie established that somewhere in the village in 1655 John Michel had established a clay pipe-making business and this business was eventually taken over by a William Pitcher who continued until 1725. So, could this once have been a pipe makers' cottage?

Apart from the initials, names and dates, many of the markings in the window are so lightly etched, mere scratches in fact, they are virtually indiscernible, therefore their meaning, if any, isn't clear. Some might be nothing more than graffiti but some appear to be 'apotropaic'. The word is of Latin/Greek origin and refers to something that diverts the imagined wrath of gods. Thus apotropaic marks were used in the belief they would protect a building and its occupants from evil spirits and witches. They were made by carpenters and builders at the time of construction and were positioned anywhere air could enter the building, such as alongside doorways, window reveals, and especially in fireplaces. The apotropaic markings were many and varied. They included interlocking circles, overlapping circles, concentric circles, ladder marks (an inclined line with additional lines crossing it - don't walk under a ladder, bad luck!), saltires (crossed lines, like the flag of St Andrew) and so on, but perhaps the most common and also easily recognizable is the so-called 'daisy wheel' which was not only used to ward off evil spirits but was also considered to be a good luck symbol. It also had religious connotations; in the 15thC the daisy wheel was a symbol of Christ. Daisy wheels are found in buildings all across Europe, and commonly date as being from the mid-16th century to the early 18th century when the fear of witches was at its height. The dates in the Lower Street cottage fit in well with that particular time. If ever as a child you sat through a geometry lesson bored to death, it's likely you will have doodled with a pair of compasses and constructed a daisy wheel. Scribe a circle, and, using the same radius, move to the periphery and scribe an arc cutting the periphery in two places. Move to one of those positions and scribe another arc. Repeat the process several times and you eventually produce a daisy wheel, the daisy having six petals.

If you were, really, really bored in that geometry lesson, you might have experimented a little and discovered what an interesting construction the daisy wheel is. By linking intersecting points you can construct first a regular hexagon, and from that all manner of



geometric shapes: polygons, squares, rectangles, equilateral triangles, isosceles triangles and so on. Incidentally, the Christian symbol of the Holy Trinity was a triangle, so that's another possible religious connection.

It's said that in the days when mathematical ability was very limited, craftsmen used the daisy wheel, etched on the ground, to determine linear dimensions, such as the length of rafters to suit a particular roof span (but there are other more convenient techniques). Even today, apparently, it is sometimes used in the design of gardens and individual flowerbeds (which certainly seems more feasible).



However, it's very unlikely the Lower Street daisy wheels were part of any practical undertaking, or that they were all etched at the same time; they probably span several hundred years. As you can see in the photograph, although they vary in size they are quite small and since they were etched on the window reveals it's reasonable to suppose they were to keep evil spirits and witches away. Preferable, I am sure you will agree, to another practice used to combat evil, that of entombing a black cat in the wall of the chimney. The black cat, that notorious pillion passenger on the witch's broomstick, was also considered to be evil and one crossing your path meant bad luck. Funny that, I always thought it was good luck.

