

SHOES CONCEALED IN BUILDINGS

By J. M. SWANN.

Shoes and other footwear have been found built into the fabric of houses in the southern half of England and Wales, and there are also isolated examples in North America, at St. David's, Ontario, Canada, and Colonial Williamsburg, U.S.A. The most northerly example in England recorded in Northampton Museum is at Eyam, in Derbyshire. The date of the shoes ranges from the early 15th century in Tewkesbury Abbey to 1935 in Warham St. Mary, Norfolk. The comparatively recent date of the latter suggests there may be people who could give a reason for the practice, other than the desire to leave a record of the times, as in the more usual burying of coins, newspapers, etc., in foundations of new buildings. In this last category, it is interesting to note that Norvic buried one of their latest models of a lady's high leg boot in the foundations, when building a new factory in Norwich in 1964.

The shoes are usually found not in the foundations, but in the walls, under window sills, over door lintels, in rubble floors, behind wainscoting, under staircases, under first storey floorboards, in the chimney breast or in the thatch or rafters. There are too many examples for the shoes to have been lost accidentally. Many can be shown to date either from the period of the building of the house or from some major alteration, such as the insertion of a chimney and floor, or re-roofing. There are a number of examples, too, of pictures of shoes or footprints scratched onto lead roofs, which may be part of the same idea.

Actual shoes occur singly or with others, very rarely in pairs, occasionally in "families"—a man's, woman's and a range of sizes of children's. Sometimes they are found with other objects—a candlestick, wooden bowl or pot, goblet, wine glass, spoon, knife sheath, purse, glove, pipe, mousetrap, button, coins, usually damaged or broken. In one case, shoes were found with the bones of two chickens which had been strangled and another two which had been buried alive. This begins to suggest the concealment may be connected with some kind of sacrificial offering¹. There are one or two cases where the date range is such that it suggests that the cache may have been opened up after some years and another shoe added.

The condition of the shoes, like the objects found with them, is usually very poor; worn out, patched, repaired. Only two cases are known where a new shoe was concealed, both 19th century examples, and these may have been hidden for the same reason as the Norvic boot, although 18th and 19th century pattens have turned up in unworn condition. As the practice covers such a long period, it is probably that more than one reason is involved, the number of superstitions connected with shoes being infinite. Some may have been sacrificial objects, such as the one with the chickens, and four examples are known of concealed shoes which have been deliberately cut—one, the upper of a substantial shoe, had been cut many times, which would have required a very sharp knife and considerable effort. The dates of the cut shoes are late 17th century, 1730-60 (this example had been suspended with string through the quarters long enough to crease the leather) and two from 1840-50's. When shoes were found recently in a North Wales cottage, the finder was advised not to throw them away, as that would bring bad luck, though the witness of the 1935 concealment could get no reason from his father, who appeared somewhat ashamed of what he was doing.

1. For further comment on this concealment and others, see Ralph Merrifield, "Folk-lore in London Archaeology" in "The London Archaeologist," Winter 1969, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 101-103.

Not all the shoes concealed were in humble homes. There was a superstition connected with a pair of lady's shoes at Papillon Hall, though these were not concealed in recent years. A clause in the deeds forbade the sale of the mansion without retaining there the shoes of a daughter of the house who had died there. They were kept behind a locked grille in a recess in the dining room. Shoes were found concealed in Amesbury House, Boughton House, as well as Tewkesbury Abbey and St. John's College, Oxford. The scratch drawings on lead usually come from church roofs.

The shoes at Papillon were of brocade, and there are other examples of fabric shoes, 17th century from Watford, 18th century from Sevenoaks and Tickenhill, though the majority are of leather, probably due to its better survival qualities. Though there are many fetishes connected with leather, this does not seem to have been one of them. Wooden clogs and pattens, and even lasts, have also been found.

The appendix lists finds recorded at Northampton Museum. In order to be more certain of the reasons behind the concealments, more evidence is needed. Anyone with information on other finds, especially from outside the known area, is invited to send it to the Museum, who would welcome the opportunity to examine any finds.

Much of the information in the appendix is incomplete, partly due to the reticence of the finders of footwear, which is usually in a disgusting condition, and partly because the pattern of concealment did not begin to emerge until after some years' work and until the right questions were asked. I would like to thank all those who supplied information, the staff of the various museums, owners of the property concerned, and in particular Mr. J. H. Thornton, of Northampton College of Technology, who has been listing these finds for many years.

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