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From guard cats to shoes up chimneys: how to protect your home from witches, fairies ... and burglars

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You shall not pass! Shutterstock

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A cat bricked up in a wall. An old shoe perched up a chimney breast. A figurine hidden in the rafters. A braid of human hair hanging in the attic. These are just some examples of the many objects – weird, wonderful, and in some instances downright disturbing – that people have found concealed within their homes during renovations. The Concealed Revealed Project is currently trying to catalogue and map these odd hidden items, and the numbers are reaching the thousands.

Many of the objects date to the 18th and 19th centuries, and most appear to have been deliberately secreted away into the fabric of houses – but why? Literary sources give us few answers, leaving us guessing as to why the past occupants of these houses felt the need or inclination to conceal such an odd assortment of objects. Fortunately, folklore archaeologists are nothing if not thrifty; we are used to making a little evidence go a long way, and so theories abound.

The most popular theory, proposed by archaeologist Ralph Merrifield in his seminal book *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, holds that these hidden objects were protective devices. The post-medieval household was, after all, subject to the malicious attention of a veritable menagerie of malevolent, supernatural beings.

The horror movies of today stem from these earlier times, when disease and misfortune were still attributed to evil forces with malign intentions. Witches and their shapeshifting familiars were still feared to threaten the community. Spirits and revenants still haunted the popular imagination, unable or unwilling to be at peace. The fairy – still a far cry from the wing-fluttering, wand-flourishing, wish-granting figure we imagine today – was widely believed to covet human children and abduct them whenever opportunity arose. And of course the devil was an ever-present force, sending his demons to tempt, taunt, and torment.

Danger everywhere

So the outside world was rife with dangers – dangers the home needed protecting from. But these preternatural forces were not deterred by locks and latches; they could breach boundaries via the tiniest spaces: slender slivers beneath doors, gaps around windows, fissures in the walls, chinks in the roof, and of course the notoriously assailable chimney. The very places that these strange hidden objects are found. So were they placed in these vulnerable locations in order to protect them? Were they a form of supernatural safeguarding?

Take the concealed cat as an example. Arranged in hunting poses and bricked up in walls, these unfortunate felines may well have been employed for the same job pet cats are tasked with today: catching vermin. Only rather than (or as well as) deterring mice, they scared away pests of the supernatural variety: the witch's familiar, for example, which was often believed to take on animal form.

Such safeguarding may strike you as strange; further evidence of the difference between us and our ancestors. But even a cursory survey of our own modern-day security habits reveals that we're not so very different after all.



Should have installed a burglar alarm ... or a shoe in your attic. Shutterstock

Safeguarding the home is an age-old and universal concern. From the manor house to the terrace; the castle to the tent, the home is considered a sacred space and we go to many lengths to protect it. In England and Wales, with 6.4m incidents of crime against households and residents reported in 2015, this concern is as prevalent today as it ever was. We install burglar alarms; fit deadlocks and door chains; protect boundaries with fences, barbed wire, even walls capped with shards of broken glass.

We haven't changed

The concealed object of post-medieval times may not be so very different to our modern-day security devices. The most common was the hidden shoe, surprisingly widespread. What was it about these seemingly innocuous items of footwear that gave them the power to protect? Well, shoes are an almost universal metaphor for their individual wearers, a truth evident in myriad mantras. Walk a mile in another person's shoes. If the shoe fits, wear it. The shoe's on the other foot. Put yourself in my shoes. And, in the immortal words of **Forrest Gump**, "my mama always said you can tell a lot about a person by their shoes ..." In popular culture – indeed, in life – the shoe has the potential to metaphorically become the person.

So maybe when people in the 18th and 19th centuries were tucking their old boots and clogs away up chimney breasts, they were intending these shoes to act as representatives of themselves – more specifically, to act as decoys. They were hoping to fool the invading witch, demon, or fairy into believing that they themselves were present, guarding vulnerable access points.

The same could be true of the little figurines hidden away in homes, or of the braid of human hair found hanging in the attic of a cottage on the Isle of Wight: were they likewise intended as decoys, protecting the home in their owners' absences? If so, there's little difference between these practices of concealment and our own habits.

We leave the lights or TV on when we go out, duping potential trespassers with the facade of human occupancy. We install fake security cameras. We display signs that warn of vicious and territorial guard dogs that don't exist. We may not be safeguarding our homes from demons and fairies, but are our concerns and methods really all that different to those of the people hiding cats, old shoes, and human hair hundreds of years ago?

 Witches 

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