Fear, because the immigrants were terrified of losing their children to illness, which many associated with evil spirits. In England, in that the practice of concealing objects in buildings to ward off evil spirits was widespread in England from the 17th Century. The immigrants were continuing an existing custom.

Stashed under a staircase. Toys concealed in an attic. A dead cat secreted into a roof cavity. Together, they sound like the disparate ingredients of a gothic horror novel: Stephen King meets Robert Louis Stevenson. Concealed shoes hidden in the fabric of a building have been discovered in many European countries, as well as in other parts of the world, since at least the early modern period. But in most cases all we have is the evidence of the shoes, and it is impossible to estimate how long they were worn before being concealed. All but twenty have been worn to 1883. That is inscribed in pencil on the back: 'William Chapman/ B (presumably = born) 3d July 1828/ this was done in 1876'. The Royal Scottish Museum's find of a pair of shoes was found in the roof of Beuren Benedictine monastery in Germany. So while there may be co-operation between the workman and the occupant, that should not be a general rule. A woman in Lincoln in 1974 was continually pestered for an old shoe by her builder. When eventually she capitulated and gave him one, they found that his Irish labourer had already put an empty bottle between the chimney and the wall-lining [10]. Otherwise I have only met one witness who recalls, as a child in 1934, seeing his father and the workman with a woman's leg boot which he had not seen before, when the kitchen floor was re-laid, at Warham St. Mary, Norfolk. Of course, he asked what they were doing, but was shooed away, unsatisfied.

Note that shoes is used as a general term for all sorts of footwear.

Distribution of the Practice

Northampton Museum has kept a card index of finds since the late 1950s. But it shows more the extent of my informants and casual reading, for I could find nothing in print when I began. I started work at Northampton Museum in 1950, and it was about 1957, in conversation with John Thornton, (then Head of the Boot & Shoe Department, Northampton College of Technology) that we realised simultaneously that the six or seven shoes we had each received for identification, could not be coincidence. They had come mostly from chimneys, and I recall being particularly puzzled by a small pair of child's boots, found in the thatch of a cottage in Stanwick, Northamptonshire [1], and wondering what sort of people allowed a child so small to lose its boots on the roof.

We were both well aware that there is much recorded [2] on other shoe superstitions, which are rife wherever shoes are traditionally worn. They are symbols of authority, as in the Old Testament. They are linked with fertility; we still tie them on the back of wedding cars. And they are generally associated with good luck (witness all the holiday souvenirs in the shape of shoes). But most of all they stand in for the person: it has been a common practice from at least the sixteenth century to at least 1966 to throw an old shoe after people ‘for luck’.

Why the shoe? It is the only garment we wear which retains the shape, the personality, the essence of the wearer. On a number of occasions, I was told that the bereaved had no problem dealing with the deceased's belongings, until it came to the shoes, and then, would I take what we wanted for the Museum and dispose of the rest. As late as the 1960s a 93-year old Newcastle woman left a pair of old shoes on a stool outside her flat to keep out intruders. It is no coincidence that many artists have produced memorable paintings of their own and friends' shoes [3].

But I suspect the Index is little guide to the extent of the practice of concealing shoes. The total number (of concealments) now recorded (1995) is over 1100: from most counties in Britain; in Europe, from Finland, Sweden, Holland, Belgium, France, Germany, Czech Republic, Spain, possibly one in Italy, and Turkey; in North America, from the eastern states and provinces, through Indiana to California. They are also found in Australia, with a possible late eleventh century one from China [4].

Types of Building

All sorts of people may be superstitious, for the buildings include not just humble cottages (although they total 42.6%); 9.4% from manor houses and mansions, ranging from Haddon Hall to Hampton Court Palace. And not just from the country: 26% are from town buildings, ranging from the London Adelphi to Northampton, Shrewsbury and Havick town halls; 2.8% are from pubs, plus four hotels and a brewery. 1.9% are unexpectedly from ecclesiastic buildings, ranging from a Baptist Chapel in Cheshire to Winchester Cathedral. Four hospitals, seven schools and orphanages, two workhouses, three barracks, eight factories including a railway station, Charlie Chaplin's film studios, two purpose-built museums; two Oxford colleges, St. John's and Queen's, Williamson Building, which had two concealments.

Several buildings have more than one concealment. Flimwell, Sussex had three. So many objects were found in Haddon Hall, hidden under floors and behind panelling, that it was obviously a long tradition there. Some thirty or so caches must have had shoes added later, because of the range of dates included; for instance the find from Comb's Ford, Stowmarket, consisted of two men's of the 1540-50s, a pair of women's 1640s, and a man's 1720s, all found in the chimney [5].

Some are appropriate to the building. Thirteen of the cottages are known to have been occupied by shoemakers or cloggers. One of the shoemakers' had shoe tools and unworn children's boots (unworn is the exception). Those from two shoe factories were also unworn, including a pair of girl's sturdy riveted boots from Simon Collier's, Northampton, built in 1885 [6], almost certainly their contemporary production. They were found under floorboards, wrapped in a neat brown paper parcel tied with string. Three of the schools/orphanages had children's shoes concealed. A well worn pair of army bluchers of c1840 was found under the floor of the military prison, Weedon Barracks [7], and an 1863 army blucher came from Fort Wellington, Ontario. Two nineteenth century women's patten's came from the wall of a blacksmith's shop in Grendon, Northamptonshire, early patten-irons being blacksmith-made. More recently a Dunlop 'Warwick' wellington 'as worn by Wimpey's workmen on the site' was buried in the foundations of the new Coppergate development, York in 1983 [8].

But some are totally inappropriate, like the tarty woman's late seventeenth century shoe from a wall in Ely Cathedral [9], the find described as looking like a shoe shop. A pair of children's shoes of c1850 came from the roof of Beuren Benedictine monastery in Germany. So while there may be co-operation between the workman and the occupant, that may not be a general rule. A woman in Lincoln in 1974 was continually pestered for an old shoe by her builder. When eventually she capitulated and gave him one, they found that his Irish labourer had already put an empty bottle between the chimney and the wall-lining [10]. Otherwise I have only met one witness who recalls, as a child in c1934-5, seeing his father and the workman with a woman's leg boot which he had not seen before, when the kitchen floor was re-laid, at Warham St. Mary, Norfolk. Of course, he asked what they were doing, but was shooed away, unsatisfied.

Dates of the Shoes Found

Almost all are found by workers who rarely report them, or DIY occupants who do. Men, I found, are usually reluctant to allow them to leave the building, or actually prohibit it. Many shoes are disposed of as repulsive, with a hint of something not to be meddled with. So information recorded has always been limited, with much of it secondhand, newspaper reports, descriptions over the telephone, appalling photographs making identification difficult, and not helped by finders' assumption that shoes are the date of the building. This should be assumed unlikely, unless they come from under the foundations. The only documented find to date came from the vestry roof of St. John's Baptist Chapel in Cheshire to Winchester Cathedral. Four hospitals, seven schools and orphanages, two workhouses, three barracks, eight factories including a railway station, Charlie Chaplin's film studios, two purpose-built museums; two Oxford colleges, St. John's and Queen's, Williamson Building, which had two concealments.

But in most cases all we have is the evidence of the shoes, and it is impossible to estimate how long they were worn before being concealed. All but twenty have been worn to 1883. That is inscribed in pencil on the back: 'William Chapman/ B (presumably = born) 3d July 1828/ this was done in 1876'. The Royal Scottish Museum's find of a pair of workman's boots under a display case installed in 1875, disappointingly look more like 1900 than 1870; so the case must have been moved before 1977 when they were found.
like normal footwear. As it is no longer familiar to our throwaway society, I must point out that until the 1960s tanned leather was like woven cloth, never discarded until it could be re-used no more. Secondly, shoes have always been expensive, about a week's wages for a pair of shoes, one and a half to two weeks' for boots. So like clothes, they were repaired, passed on to others, modified to fit and to keep up with changing fashion. Northampton Museum has a pair of Victorian slippers known to have been worn by father and son for 62 years. In 1990 a shoe manufacturer attended his grand-daughter's wedding in the same shoes he wore for his own, 53 years before [12]; though these are exceptions. The standing joke in Northampton factories to the 1950s was of men who returned boots, complaining they were beginning to wear out after only twenty years. So perhaps twenty years is a more reasonable estimate for the life of a good boot. Hence linking finds with the date of even major alterations to a building is not easy, though evidence indicates that this is when the majority were concealed.

So with these reservations here are the statistics:

One reputed Roman from Lympne Castle walls, probably so dated because it is said to be haunted by a Roman soldier. Otherwise the earliest was found behind Winchester Cathedral choirstalls, installed in 1308. The four Czech shoes are c1360[13]. Four others are from the fourteenth century. Shoes were made of more substantial leather after 1490; so for the total, the fourteenth century is twenty, with a peak of 8 from the 1590s, 15 from 1600-10; a pattern repeated at the turn of each century, obviously a dangerous and uncertain time.

Total for the seventeenth century: 154 – with 25 and 16 from the 1650s, 1660s. Peak of 65 from the 1690s, 46 from 1700-10.

Eighteenth century: 270 – 26 from the 1720s, 36 from the 1750s. Peak: 40 from the 1780s, 64 1790s, 37 1800-10.

Nineteenth century: 424 – 110 & 76 from the 1850s, 1860s.

Twentieth century: 44 – 11 & 12 from 1900-20.

The most recent recorded are 1983, the York wellington above; and 1989: when a boy heard that the shoe sent for identification was concealed to keep witches away, he was so frightened that they put one of his red plastic wellingtons in the same place. Be very careful what you tell children. In 1991 an estate-worker's shoe and a time capsule were added when a man's 'old court shoe' was replaced where it was found behind panelling in Knebworth House [14]. The decline in figures for this (20th) century reflects less alterations to more recent buildings, and modern methods of demolition of the high-rises.

It is probably no coincidence that the peaks coincide with periods of war when superstitious practices generally increase: against Spain at the end of the sixteenth century, the Civil War, the Glorious Revolution of 1688 followed by the Marlborough Wars, the Seven Years War in the mid eighteenth century, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, and the Crimean War.

Location in the Building

I have only once been present when shoes were found: in Northampton's Abington Museum, a former manor house, where late eighteenth century women's shoes were found under the attic floors over the east front door, the wing added in 1736. Most of the shoes were referred to me covered in either mortar dust or the sooty dust prevalent when coal was used for heating. Some were found on ledges or rafters, others actually embedded in plaster, and had to be contemporary with it, and deliberate. The shoe which finally convinced me the finds were not accidental losses was an adult shoe, possibly of the 1620s, found in the plaster half-way up a wall at Leigh Barton, Devon. It could not have been plastered over by accident. A few found close to the chimney were singed or heat-dried, though the majority had been put sufficiently far from heat to remain intact. Obviously care was involved. Some were in containers: one from Farndon, Nottinghamshire, was in an earthenware pot behind the fireplace, not the normal way to store shoes.

The most popular place is in fact the chimney, fireplace or hearth, downstairs or up, or on the ledge as the narrow gap between the two floors, like the Stowmarket shoes. They often come from the cavity between stack and bedroom wall, including the fourteen from Winston, Suffolk, which were found each side of the chimney, the left-hand cache sealed with a tile. These proved to be of two dates: c1650, and the next generation, 1680-90s. The quantities of shoes found range from a single shoe or part of one, to 28 from Quincy, Massachusetts and 32 from Earl Soham, Suffolk. As well as from the chimney, 26 come from an adjacent oven or cupboard used to store things like shoes, which need to be kept dry. Total: 233, which is 26.2%. Of course, the hearth was the centre of the home, the place everyone congregated in the days before central heating, as well as an access point for rain and birds. They range in date from 1540 to 1910, and it was here that John Thornton, who prove superstitious in spite of his scientific background, chose to conceal a pair of his wife's shoes when he blocked the bedroom fireplace in 1967. The 1989 boy's wellington went into 'the flue'.

Ninety-eight came from unspecified locations, being found 'in rubble' or 'during demolition', and often with little other information. They date from 'medieval' to 1930s.

The second most common location is under the floor or above the ceiling: in many cases it was difficult to decide if they had been concealed from below, or more easily put in from above. One was definitely 'between the modern false ceiling and the original', three between original and later floors laid over them. Because of this problem, the two positions were counted together, which has inflated their importance. Sixty-four came from under the first floor, 30 from under attic floors, such as the man's and boy's ('father and son') from Chapel Brampton [15], 27 from under the ground floor: eight of them specified as kitchen, three from near foundations/foundation stones, another beaten into an earth floor.

Some readers may be familiar with the story of Papillon Hall, Leicestershire. David Papillon (1691-1762) is reputed to have had a Spanish mistress who was not allowed to leave the house, and who died mysteriously just before he married in 1717 (a woman's skeleton was found walled up in an attic during the Lutyens alterations in 1903). The legend is that she left a curse if disaster if the shoes, in which she wished to walk, left the house. Accordingly, each purchaser was handed the shoe (of green and silver silk brocade, with red velvet clogs, silver embroidered) with the title deeds. The house was haunted in 1866 when this was omitted, and again when they were sent to a Paris exhibition, possibly 1878. They were then locked behind a grille in the wall, high above the mantelpiece, until removed for the Lutyens work, when there was trouble again. They were then returned and the key thrown away. The house was occupied by American troops during the Second World War, and the shoes twice stolen. Only one shoe and a clog remained in 1945. The other shoe was found under the floorboards when the house was demolished in 1950, though the second clog is still missing. Obviously someone had hidden the shoe where it could not be stolen again. The shoes and clog are in Leicester Museum, and could very well date from the 1710-1715 period of the Crimean War.

The total under floors is 210, 22.86%. They range in date from 1555 to the 1940s, with quite low figures for the mid eighteenth century, quite high for the 1820s. Otherwise all location figures conform to the general pattern. One of the purposes of the statistics was to ascertain if any one hiding place was favoured at a given time, but on present evidence no pattern has emerged.

The next most common location is from walls, 'walled in' being a frequent description. This could include areas adjacent to chimney, doors and windows, though finders unaware of their significance did not so record them –again inflating this position's importance. A number come from behind panelling, skirting or cornice: one from the junction of stone footings and the cob wall built on them; four from under the wall plate; two from between two buildings in a row; two from near eaves or gable. Some were specified as internal walls: four from the master bedroom walls, the obvious place if linked with fertility (such as a very attractive child'' early seventeenth-century shoe from Helmdon[16]). Total from this location: 169, 18.8%, ranging in date from 'Roman' and 1500 to 1920s.

Almost as many, 168, come from the roof, which for a long time ran the chimney a close second for the number of finds, and might very well again, if we could separate the under floor/above ceiling finds and get a more accurate position for those from walls. The date range is early fifteenth century to 1910s. They may be from the rafters, such as the mid fifteenth century shoe from Toledo, Spain, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum; from the thatch like the Stanwick boots which puzzled me so much; or in the roof space above the top ceiling. Sometimes they are at the junction of an internal wall, near a chimney or over a stairwell. The Oxford Queen's shoes lay on the floor 'side by side'.
As for the smaller quantities, 48, 5.42% came from under stairs, which is frequently used as a cupboard, or may run alongside the chimney. They date from the sixteenth century to the 1920s. Again some were plastered in. The man's buckle shoe of the 1730s from Briggate, Norwich, hung on a nail by a string though the back of the shoe [17]. Two were in the centre of a tread of boarded-up stairs, and several on either the top or bottom step. Incidentally, if the Briggate shoe suggests a container, a Worcester shire finder described hers as 'folded up to form a box'.

Thirteen, 1.5% come from the door area: six from above the lintel, one under the doorstep, two from a blocked-up door, like the pair of youth's of c1690 from Cononley, Yorkshire [18]. They date from Tudor to the 1890s.

Nine, 1% come from the window, the other major opening into a house, including one from a blocked window. A smart woman's brown suede shoe of c1690 came from under the windowsill of a cottage in Potterspy, Northamptonshire [19]. They date from 1690 to the 1910s.

Thirteen, 1.5% come from foundations, for example a clog overshoe from a house in Carlton, Bedfordshire, built in 1707 [20]. They date from 1670 to 1910, and Norvic buried a pair of their current production, women's high-leg boots, under their new factory in 1964.

Other locations not yet mentioned include a dairy thrall (cold slab) at Diseworth, Leicestershire (2 men's and 2 boys' boots of the 1850s): from a disused garderobe in Fowey (a last of c1750), and a cusspit (boots of c1885), the latter probably rubbed disposal. Men's workboots and clogs are occasionally found abandoned in mines and quarries (about a dozen reported to date). From Lounge coalmine, Leicestershire, 1991 came two men's 1450s boots, parts of sixteenth century shoes, including a 4.75" child's shoe, and a late seventeenth century man's. As yet I can find no evidence they are part of the concealed shoe practice, though it is difficult to explain such a small child's shoe otherwise [21].

The Boots and Shoes

The early examples recorded were all of durable leather, which still far outnumbers other materials. It has seductive qualities linked with other leather problems: shoes can easily become a fetish object. Leather also retains the footshape better than textile. But even so, shoes with silk, wool or cotton uppers have been found concealed, mostly from more recent centuries, such as leather's side-lace boot from Olney of c1850 [22]. Finds also include wooden-soled clogs, including a child's of c1850 from Marefair, Northampton, where clogs were scorned as a cheap substitute for shoes [23], even before the later association with Northern mills. There are also pattens, lasts and two miniature shoes of wood; a digging iron, which is mostly iron; and rubber, such as 1850s galoshes [24]. So it appears that it is the shoe or shoe-shape that is significant, not the material. Shoe and sole outlines may be found scratched on buildings and other structures, which confirms the significance of the shoe shape [25].

Twenty-two examples are associated with bones: three single cats, and one with two kittens and a rat. (The thousands of other cats not found with shoes, I have left to other researchers, but it looks likely that most of those were not accidental [34].) Five have chickens. The well-known example from Highgate in the Museum of London [35], Ralph Merrifield later believed were not, as published; buried alive, as there is another example with heads, feet and eggs. Other living things are a bunch of flowers (perhaps the wedding bouquet?) and 12 examples of seeds and nuts. And if one looks for fertility symbols: two dolls and a doll's eye cemented into the centre of a gable of Upwood House built in 1578, which recalls the Middle Eastern protection against the evil eye.
Some are associated with fire: 21 with clay tobacco pipes, from their first introduction to the 1850s; others with candlesticks and snuffers, lamps, a fireback and coal.

Others may be protective: 13 bottles, ranging from tiny phials to wine [36]. Two concealments include a pebble, one pierced right through, ‘the kind which in Suffolk is hung by beds or outside the stable door to ward off the evil eye’ [37]. There are pages from a Bible, prayer and hymn books.

Occasionally there are papers with names, perhaps an attempt to ensure their existence was noted: a list of deserters, a newspaper report of a court case, and a scrap inscribed ‘Mary Nichols 1819’, similar to William Chapman’s, except that it was not in the shoe.

There are personal items, sharp tools and implements for both men and women, items connected with horses and the home, and children’s toys. Most of these objects are worn out, incomplete or broken: wingless stems appear deliberately snapped.

Comments of Finders and Informants

Repeatedly I was told about finds by women who could not understand why the husband would not let the shoe leave the house. The conclusion was clear that male superstitions are involved. By the late 1950s I had been told that allowing it to leave brought bad luck, and it was only later that I realized the precise comments must be recorded. Since then, four said the shoes kept bad luck away, three witches, one the plague, five used the word evil, one the evil eye. Florence Ledger (not noted for reliability in her writing on historic shoes [38]) states that the boot buried under the doorstep of Hyssington church contains a tiny savage bull, reputedly the wicked squire shrunk by the vicar.

Ralph Merrifield has suggested [39] that concealed shoes may be linked with the fourteenth century belief that Sir John Schorne, rector of North Marston, Buckinghamshire, conjured the devil into a boot. His shrine was a place of pilgrimage until the Reformation, and several pubs in the area commemorate him. But one could rationalize this tradition, as the shoes of his time were so narrow and pointed (some were actually called devil's horns) that it would be easy to believe the devil was pinching you, a suggestion women today will understand. But it does reinforce the idea that evil can be lured into a boot.

A letter from a Hampshire woman was quite moving. She had innocently sent her finds to London for identification. While they were away, the house which had hitherto seemed so benign, had strange noises from the attic room where they were found. She even went to let the cat out, only to find nothing there. When there was a sensation of the floor shaking, her son refused to sleep there. She had heard that shoes were put in the chimney to keep out evil, which came in at the highest point [40]. An Abercarn reporter found while that the boots were out of the house for exhibition, they had nothing but bad luck, the death of pets, flooding and the shed fell down. They now wished to leave the boots strictly alone, no publicity, no photography.

In the 1980s I was informed second-hand from a Lancashire woman [41] who could not recall if she had heard it in Salford or Rochdale, but it would be about 1964, that shoes are put in the north-east corner, the side from which evil spirits gain entry. Since then, I have enquired about the position of north, but so far only recorded two finds from the north-east, the rest being north, north-west and south-west, though north-east occurs several times in Ralph Merrifield’s 1987 book.

A Norwich informant said the concealments had to be too left shoes, ‘which hereabouts is the accepted way to keep witches at bay’. But this would have been difficult from 1600 to 1800 when virtually all footwear was made straights, not shaped for right or left, as was a high proportion of nineteenth century children’s and quite a number of women’s; many of the concealed shoes are straights. Brian Durrans of the Museum of Mankind has suggested [42] that if people were worried about witchcraft, they may have concealed their own shoes to prevent sorcery against themselves. A 1974 excavator of a well at Chenes Manor, Hertfordshire, on finding a number of single adult shoes, was told by a local woman that when discarding a pair of worn out shoes, one should go to water, one to fire, for good luck. (Would ‘fire’ include the chimney? But note that 11.3% of finds are pairs). Merrifield also suggested that a worn shoe stamped with the wearer’s personality could infer a personal sacrifice [43].

Many tried to rationalize the finds, suggesting that broken glass kept rats away, because it cut their paws. A man finding a child’s shoe in a chimney assumed it had been left by a boy chimney-sweep. And I did wonder if boots in mines were kept as a spare pair and then abandoned when they were not worth taking to the surface just to throw away.

Thirteen people insisted the find must be returned to the house. The Hampshire woman said she had done that instinctively. The Silverton finder nailed his to a beam. Many others, especially pubs, said they would put it back in the niche with glass in front. Norwich said they intend to keep the shoe on the premises ‘as witchcraft is still popular here’. Another collected his in 1986, he said, for re-concealment ‘after a run of misfortunes’, only to display it in his local Heritage Centre.

On the positive side, four said the shoes were for good luck. The Salford/Rochdale informant, after talking of evil spirits, went on: ‘the shoe must be old, irreparable or one that has been severely cut up to render it of no use, except as a good luck charm, like the well known horseshoe’. So this is a possible explanation for Hartwell. ‘I was not built in, simply place there. The custom is well known in the north of England and north Wales’. Well known it may be, but she remains my sole informant. A Montrose finder said it was common practice to put the baby’s first shoes in the roof as a luck token (like the Stanwick boots). Welsh miners in the 1849 California gold rush are reported as saying that if a child’s shoe is placed in the house, he will not leave home.

In the 1930s an informant’s grandmother (note: female, this time) put one from a pair of worn out shoes under the floorboards when they moved house in London, to ensure they settled there. And see the fuss in Gorky’s My Childhood: when they moved house in the 1870s, grandmother flung an old bast shoe on the fire, and invoked the hearth spirit: ‘Here’s a sleigh for you. Come with us to our new house’. And it was grandfather who hurried her with ‘You’ll bring shame on us all’ [44]. So there are examples where women were involved.

The comments from Audley End are typical of the confused thinking that dogs discussion of the subject. They ‘assumed the shoe had been thrown away, rather than hidden, but kept as a sort of charm’. A note in a Hampshire magazine in 1986 says: ‘It was traditional for each member of the family to hide a pair of shoes in the chimney to bring good luck and happiness to the home’, a garbled version of my comments over some twenty-five years. Another suggested fertility, a word I have used when comparing them with shoes tied on wedding cars. But Wynford Vaughan Thomas, not long before his death, certainly was not quoting me. He described one as the Boot of Life, but unfortunately did not elaborate. In Indiana I am told [45] they hang live birds in the eaves to ward off evil spirits, which may relate to the bird bones found. And a colleague from Athens [46] told me in 1990 that every new bank or apartment house built there is consecrated with the blood of a slain cock, which recalls the sacrifices in Homer.

Having watched men working under my floorboards, I have seen the adjacent rubbish, including the empty cigarette packet, swept in before the boards are nailed down, usually for quickness. But in the days before regular refuse collection, rubbish disposal was more difficult. You have to be desperate for heat to burn leather, because of the

We should remember the urge of ordinary people to leave a mark of their existence in the world. I note the thrill of people making entries in museum registers, intended to be kept for ever. The Savoy Chapel inscription is an obvious example of this, as is much of today's graffiti. We also have an urge to leave a flavour of our times, shown in the time capsules popular from the nineteenth century onwards, and now enjoying a resurgence in the last years of this millennium. Brian Durrans, researching these, has put the York Coppergate wellington into the ‘compensatory recognition’ class: of labourers seeking credit for the work, as well as the architects, master builders and clients usually involved in topping-out ceremonies. Of course, I have often wondered if there is a connection between these and shoes concealed in the roof, but as yet have no
evidence. And then the inevitable question: is this connected with Masonry?

For those at the bottom of the house, I think Merrifield is right to link them with foundation burials, which go back to prehistory, in spite of the low survival rate for shoes there. Günter Grass wrote The Tin Drum in 1959. Describing the Germans 1944 Normandy defences, he writes:

“Every one of our pill boxes has a puppy in it, walled up in the foundations. Pretty soon we'll have to use kittens, but cats aren't as good as dogs. If we run out of puppies, we'll have to stop building. Cats are bad luck. My buddies are mostly from the country, and in the country when they build a house, or a barn, or a village church, it's the custom to put something living in the foundations”[47].

It reminds us of the ancient Carthaginians putting babies in foundations, a practice found also in Roman times in Britain, presumably for fertility, (or a kindlier place for a premature death?). So concealed shoes may be yet another instance of the shoe representing the person. Perhaps at some point, in spite of the high infant mortality rate, the baby's shoes were substituted, and then, as people forgot the reason, anyone's shoes would serve.

At present we can only surmise. I eventually realized that the lack of information and the secrecy continually encountered suggest that the superstition, if disclosed, ceases to be effective. Given the huge area covered and the time span, there is likely to be more than one superstition, which is continually evolving, based around the two great human concepts of good and evil. Fertility is a strong motive, but so is protection. I appeal to everyone to treat any finds as an archaeological excavation, recording address, position including direction of north, any order or layers, associated objects [48], and comments from finders and observers. Northampton Museum continues to act as a clearing house for information. With sufficient evidence, the puzzles may be solved.

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