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A Light in the Darkness – the Taper Burns of Donington le Heath Manor House

By Alison Fearn, PhD candidate, University of Leicester

Summary

In 2016 the author undertook an in-depth survey and analysis of the medieval manor house of Donington le Heath in Leicestershire. During the investigation, a large number of markings and graffiti were recorded across the structure. Further analysis of the markings, their form, and their distribution led to the conclusion that most were ritual in nature and were created to add a significant layer of spiritual protection to vulnerable areas of the structure.

Introduction

The vast majority of the markings recorded at Donington le Heath are considered to be “ritual protection marks”; symbols that had an apotropaic function, which, in their simplest form were designed to ward off evil influences and misfortune. The markings took many forms, most of which are relatively common finds, and appear frequently in the lexicon of early non-elite “folk beliefs.” The most notable collection of such markings at Donington le Heath, however, were *taper burn marks*.

It is still not universally accepted that the majority of recorded taper burn marks at early sites were deliberately created, and there are still questions as to whether the scorch and taper burns were ritual or apotropaic in origin. For example, Jonathan Willis, in his book on

sin and salvation states they were “obviously the result of rush or tallow candles accidentally marking timber.”¹



Figure 1 Donington le Heath, Leicestershire, south face. Photo: Leicestershire County Council.

In this paper, drawing on the findings at Donington le Heath, (**fig. 1**) I will argue that this statement is fundamentally flawed. The supposedly accidental creation of such marks hardly explains the presence of marks under the floorboards at Knole House, nor does it explain the deliberately paired marks observed by Timothy Easton, much less the groups of three and four parallel marks found at Donington manor. There are also numerous examples, at sites such as Sissinghurst and Gainsborough Old Hall, where the charred timber has been scrapped away before the taper was re-applied, leaving tool marks within the burn and a distinctive hollow bowl shaped marking. At both Knole and Sissinghurst and elsewhere, taper burn marks were recorded lying horizontally across the timbers, indicating that they could have only been applied before the timber was inserted into the structure. In some cases, as at Gainsborough Old Hall, the sheer number of taper burn marks, including over twenty-five deep marks recorded on individual timbers, makes the notion of accidental marking a near impossibility.² Given the physical evidence Willis's argument is simply not tenable.

¹ Jonathan Willis, *Sin and Salvation in Reformation England* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 234.

² Matthew Champion, *Sissinghurst Castle Graffiti Survey: Context and Interpretation* (Unpublished National Trust Report, 2017).

Additionally, the use of candles and tapers in ritual practices is well-attested. In 1553, Thomas Kirchmaier, a dramatist and Protestant theologian born in Straubing, Germany, described the folkloristic rituals connected to Christmas and associated festivals including Twelfth Night, stating:

And round about the house they go, with torch or taper clear,
That neither bread nor meat do want, nor witch with dreadful charm,
Have power to hurt their children or do the cattle harm.³

Easton has recorded a series of sixteen 17th-century candle-marked ceilings from a variety of vernacular dwellings with extensive application of marks and patterns on ceilings, Woolpit being a particularly extensive example.⁴ These marks include grids, initials, crosses, sigils, and an R and reversed R symbol, the reversed R also being found at Donington, not as a burn mark, but accompanying a compass drawn circle, another apotropaic and well documented symbol.

Fire was a real and ever-present risk in both the medieval and early-modern century home. Household holders were well-aware of the risk that naked flames posed to the building fabric and content. In urban contexts, the night watch looked for signs of fire, and, during the heat of summer, householders were encouraged to leave pails of water at their doors as a preventative measure. In the suburbs of many towns, fire officers were appointed who could enter private dwellings and inspect the household for fire hazards, with appropriate fines being levied for those who flouted the rules.⁵ Because of this, most would be careful with tapers and unlikely to allow scorch marks to be a usual feature of housekeeping. For example, at Donington le Heath, there are no marks or metalwork on the timber doorframes to suggest any fixtures or fittings to support a candle or taper bracket, which would give rise to burn

³ Thomas Kirchmaier aka Thomas Naogeorgus *Regnum Papisticum*, Oporinus, 1553, translated in H. S. Morris, *In the Yule Log Glow: Christmas Poems from around the World* (J. B. Lippincott, 1891), p. 110.

⁴ T. Easton, "Candlepowers," *Cornerstone* Vol 32/4 (2011), pp. 56-60.

⁵ *The Common Councils Acts and Ordinances 1582*.

marks. Given that these timbers were already old in the 17th century, they were susceptible to flame and fire and thus the household would have been mindful of the risk.

Perhaps most compellingly, experimental archaeology conducted by Dean and Hill ⁶ concluded that it took forty-five minutes with a candle or taper, placed at a precise angle, to replicate the teardrop shape on timber to a three-mm depth. In addition, comparisons with burn marks that were undoubtedly the result of accidents and carelessness, such as those left by 18th-century French prisoners in the roof space at Sissinghurst, are markedly different with the deliberately created teardrop-shaped taper burns.⁷ As burn marks are known from other European and Scandinavian contexts, it is suggestive that burn making, with its very prescriptive homogenous typology as part of a cohesive, culturally driven practice based on a readily understood grammar of folkloristic practices and principles.

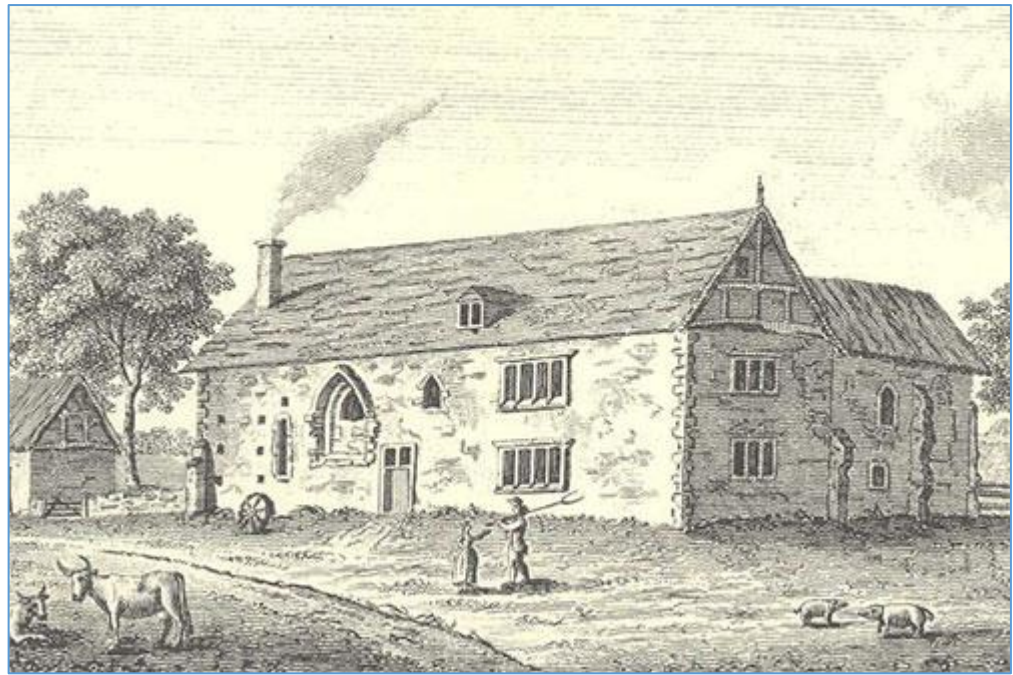
The Building Survey

The Grade II* listed manor house is an extant medieval building situated in the small village of Donington le Heath, about one mile south of the industrial former mining town of Coalville in North West Leicestershire. Now considered part of the greater Coalville area, Donington le Heath village still retains the atmosphere and semblance of a rural agricultural settlement. Modern Donington still runs along the ancient holloway which comprises the western boundary to the site of the manor house and associated network of small rural ways and roads. The manor house was purchased by Leicestershire County Council in 1965 from the Hills, a local farming family, who had in turn purchased the farm from the Harley Trust. Seven years of renovations followed to return the building to its medieval origins. Originally

⁶ J. Dean and N. Hill, "Burn marks on buildings: Accidental or Deliberate?" *Vernacular Architecture* Vol 45/1 (2014), pp. 1-15.

⁷ Matthew Champion, *Sissinghurst Castle Graffiti Survey: Context and Interpretation* (Unpublished National Trust Report, 2017).

Figure 2 John Pridden, Engraving of Donington le Heath, Leicestershire manor house, now a farm, c. 1780. Photo: public domain.



the manor was a conference venue for the Council, but later became a registered museum, which it has remained until the present.

The place name evidence suggests that Donington was a small settlement or farmstead belonging to a person named Dunna, and was of likely Anglo-Saxon origin. Like many English settlement sites, Donington le Heath is first mentioned in Domesday Book, where it is described as “Thorkel holds 3 hides (360 acres) in Donington from Nigel d’Aubergny.” D’Aubergny was a baron of Norman descent who held additional lands elsewhere in England. Although there is no mention of a manor house at Donington when the survey was compiled, the village itself is recorded as having only one resident, a “villein” or tied peasant, whose name is not recorded. The land itself comprised “six ploughs” - a plough being a unit of land which could be ploughed by eight oxen and was calculated for the purpose of collecting taxes.⁸ In addition, there was “4 acres of meadow and a wood ½ mile long and 160 perches broad.”⁹ Donington le Heath was considered a lower-status settlement, being valued at only

⁸ “Conservation Plan: Donington le Heath” (Northwest Leicestershire DC, 2010).

⁹ J. Curtis, *A Topographical History of the County of Leicester: The Ancient Part compiled from Parliamentary and Other Documents*. (Ashby-de-la-Zouche, 1831), p. 54.

two shillings at the time Domesday recorded the holdings in 1086, possibly due to its marginal location between agricultural land and heath.

The first documentary evidence for a manor at Donington le Heath is found circa 1210, when William de Sees gives land to the nearby Priory at Charley; a monastic community of only three monks following either the Benedictine, or more likely, the Augustinian Order. This land was leased out to tenants, the first one Robert of Ibstock in 1210. William's son Gilbert held the manor and nineteen virgates and half a mill. By the end of the 13th century the land was rented to William Le Mey and Richard de Charley, and there is the possibility that an earlier timbered hall stood on the site at Donington preceding the construction of the stone-built building.

At some point in the last decade of the 13th century, Robert de Herle purchased the manor from Thomas de Charley and probably began building of the current manor house.¹⁰ Robert de Herle was the lawyer to John Comyn, both Lord of Whitwick Castle three miles from Donington le Heath, and also the 7th Earl of Buchan. John Comyn had been expelled from Scotland by Edward I, due to his part in the rebellion against the King.¹¹

Robert married to Isabella, and after his death in 1320, Isabella continued to reside at Donington le Heath (she was recorded as still living there in 1332) until her own death.¹² Robert was interred at Garendon Abbey, some few miles across the Charnwood Forest from his manor house; Isabella's last resting place is not recorded.

Donington then passed to Robert's elder brother, William de Herle, and from him to a succession of prominent and well-connected Leicestershire families, including the Pakeman

¹⁰ V. McLoughlin, "Family Connections: Donington le Heath," *Leicestershire Historian* 37 (2001), p. 6.

¹¹N. Hill & P. Liddle, "Donington le Heath revisited," *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* Vol 87 (2013), pp. 161-189.

¹² McLoughlin, p. 7.

and Digby families, although the manor house was a secondary holding and never a primary residence for any of the later families.¹³

From 1614-18 Donington is recorded as belonging to Ann Digby and her husband Thomas Swinglehurst, it may have been that the manor and lands formed part or all of Ann's marriage settlement, as extensive modernizations and renovations were carried out at this time. By 1620 the Swinglehursts were no longer in residence, possibly having moved to a more fashionable house, and the manor passed back into the main Digby holdings. In 1627 much of the land was apportioned into three lots and sold off. By the close of the 17th century the manor and remaining land was owned by Thomas Harley from Osgathorpe, upon whose death the manor and land became a Trust, in which remains to this day. (The Harley Trust was founded primarily for the dependents of deceased clergy from the diocese of Leicester.) From then until the middle of the 20th century, the manor was occupied by a succession of tenant farmers. That the manor house was a tenanted farm probably aided in its preservation, as there were few "improvements" of a structural nature made to the fabric of the building; many features being simply covered over by match-boarding and plaster facings, or bricked in.

The manor house itself is constructed of local forest granite with dressed quoins of sandstone. The roof was originally of a particularly localized and distinctive green-banded slate quarried from Groby, now replaced with further plain grey slate from the quarries of the Charnwood Forest. A 19th-century watercolor shows the two wings under thatch. Excavations by Anne Dornier in June – July 1970 revealed fragments of the original slate roofing material as well as green-glazed ceramic roof finials.¹⁴ The manor house was once moated on at least three sides with the western-most boundary being the holloway which led into the medieval

¹³ Hill & Liddle, pp. 161-89.

¹⁴ A. Dornier, "Donington le Heath," *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* Vol 47 (1971-2), pp. 22-42.

village of Donington le Heath. Although the manor was effectively defensible and likely fortified, it was of low enough status to not require a licence to crenellate. Indeed, Donington could be considered an aspirational building, “built in modest imitation of the social superiors.”¹⁵ The remains of the moat and a partial bank structure can be seen clearly in aerial photographs taken during the 1980s.

The interior woodwork consists of a mix of 13th and 17th -century timbers. The roof trusses that support the main roof have been dated by dendrochronology to circa 1618 and the internal door jambs to the arched oak doorways of the upper floor wings are dated to between 1272 and 1307.¹⁶

Consisting of two stories, the house is comprised of a central block running east-west with rear projecting wings aligned north-south comprising a half H plan. (**fig. 3**) The fenestration are a mix of 13th-century square head and trefoil lancets, 20th century reconstructed lancets, and 17th-century three-and-four light mullioned windows. At the eastern (**fig. 4**) and western ends (**fig. 5**) of the upstairs Great Hall/Chamber there were originally two large Gothic-arched windows, only one of which now remains and its inner mullions and tracery are now missing. Two fireplaces remain in situ, one large, 17th-century kitchen fireplace of asymmetric appearance and constructed of a soft local sandstone and one small brick-backed and sandstone-arched fireplace which stylistically appears to be late 16th or early 17th century in origin.¹⁷

The ground floor is bisected by a wattle and daub screen which originally comprised the eastern side of the through passage, the western screen is now missing and was removed as part of the renovations in the 1960s and 70s. Archaeologically, these series of securely dated features help date some of the more interesting features within the manor house.

¹⁵ D. Williams, “Fortified Manor Houses,” *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* Vol 5. (1974-5), pp. 1-16.

¹⁶ VAG (Vernacular Architecture Group) c/o Robin Howard (1988) Nottingham University.

¹⁷ A. Fearn, “Liminal Landscapes of Belief,” unpublished MA theses, University of Leicester (2016), p. 12.

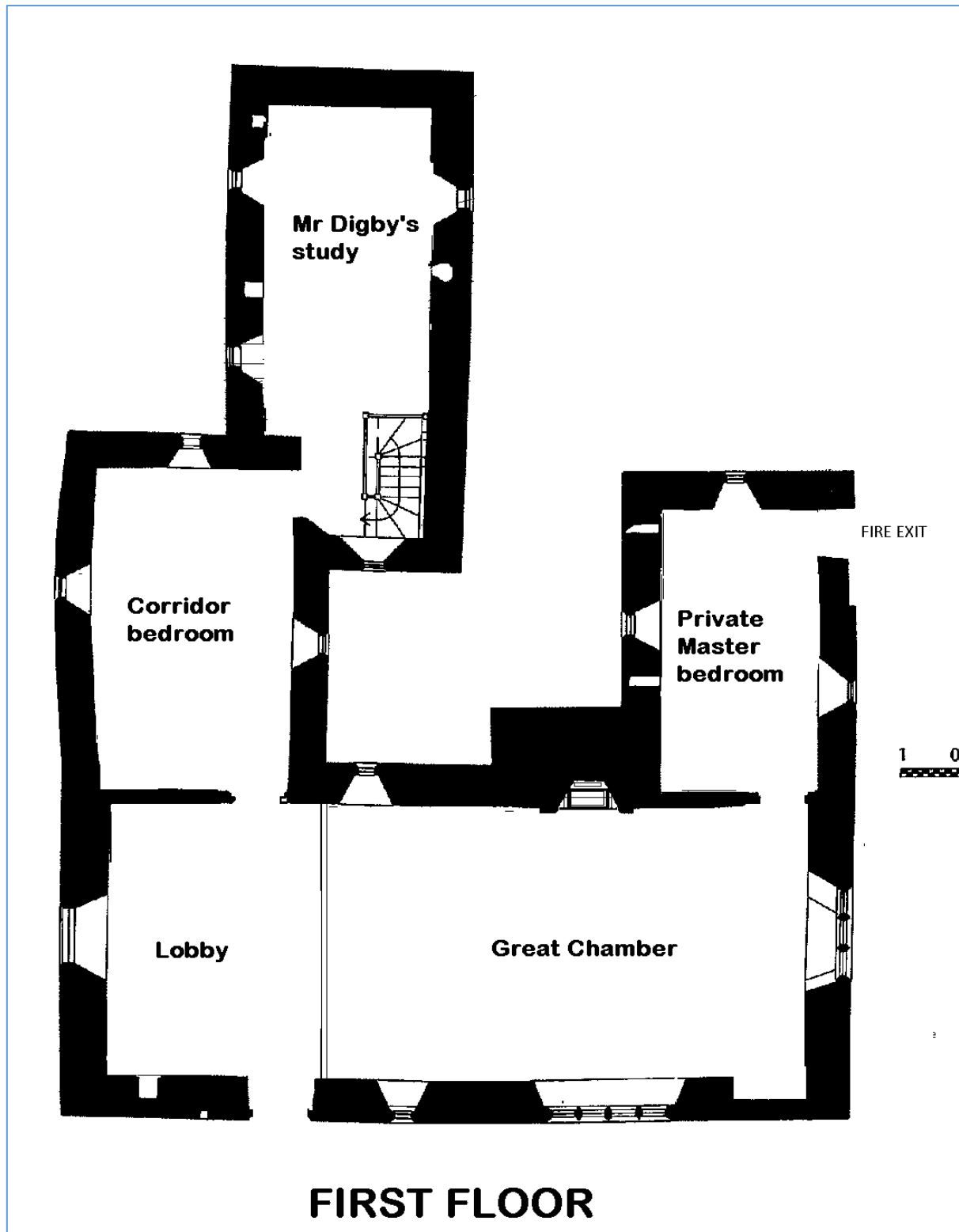


Figure 3 First-floor plan of Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Drawing: Leicestershire County Council.



Figure 4 East wing of Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: Leicestershire County Council.



Figure 5 West wing of Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: Leicestershire County Council.

The Markings

Following a raking-light survey conducted in 2016, Donington le Heath manor house revealed a surprising amount of graffiti on both the wood and stone. Yet the most- prevalent form of mark was that of the “taper burn” or applied scorch mark.

As the manor house was extensively renovated during the 70s as part of a program to restore the house to its medieval origins, much of the later post-medieval building fabric and internal joinery was removed though some 17th-century features remained and can be dated as such with some certainty.¹⁸

The majority of the taper burns follow a tight spatial distribution, with the densest concentration being found on the first floor of the manor house. More specifically, these taper burns occur only on the doorways associated with the east and west wings. These doorways have been dated by dendrochronology to give felling dates of 1272-1307. The highest concentration of taper burns occurs on the western-most doorway, which has applied marks on both faces of the door jambs. **(fig. 6)** The patterning to some of the burns run across seasoning cracks, which indicates that the scorching occurred either as part of the construction process on green timber, or shortly after completion of the building, as part of a domestic dedication or protective ritual.¹⁹ It is worth noting, however, that as much of the later building fabric was removed, there is an inherent bias within the standing structure, and it is not known if any later timber joinery was similarly marked as part of a continued cultural practice.

The western-most doorway divided public and private space circa 1300-1600. The highest concentration of scorch marks/burning episodes are to be found on the jambs facing into the public area of the presumed Great Hall (current museum interpretation is of a Great

¹⁸ Fearn, p. 12.

¹⁹ Matthew Champion, pers. comm 2016.



Figure 6 West doorway taper burns facing into Great Hall, Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: author.

Chamber as the house is fixed in time to 1620 and displayed as an early 17th-century domestic dwelling). The doorway originally separated the Great Hall from a suite of two private rooms, most probably a bedchamber and solar before the 1618 improvements. There are between seventeen and twenty separate scorching events, the majority on the western-most side of the door jamb. These predominantly follow the classic teardrop shape -- the typical form for these sorts of burns, and further work is required to determine whether the

shape itself may hold some significance.²⁰ Two of the burns are atypical, and are long scorch marks which cross seasoning cracks within the timber, and the depth of burn is deep, with hardened charcoal residue remaining in situ. These marks would have been highly visible to people within the Hall itself. The doorway into the second room is a 20th-century replacement with no surviving medieval or later timber surrounds, and some roof trusses survive although the surfaces are somewhat degraded.

There is a cluster of three slightly more ephemeral marks to the western-most arched timber framework. These too exhibit the teardrop shape, but there is little charring to the timber surface, although there is some depth to the marks, and the oak graining is apparent. Groupings of taper burns/scorch marks are significant and probably referenced Christian belief and symbolism: groups of three represented the Holy Trinity, while clusters of five reflect the five wounds of Christ, and seven, the number of gifts of the spirit. Dean and Hill have also noted the occurrence of paired marks within two vernacular buildings at Dennington and Peasehall, Suffolk.²¹



Figure 7 Taper burn west doorway facing Great Hall, Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: author.

²⁰ Easton, pp. 56-60; M. Champion, *Sissinghurst Castle Graffiti Survey: Context and Interpretation* (Unpublished National Trust Report, 2017).

²¹ J. Dean and N. Hill, pp. 1-15.

Following recent fieldwork, Matthew Champion noted that many taper burns appear to have had charred deposits removed by scraping, as tooling scars remain visible on the timber surface, and then further taper burn applications have been applied over the same mark, this may be the case with the grouping of three taper burns.²² This may have been repeat marked as part of an annual ritual or celebration such as Twelfth Night as attested by Kirchmaier in his description of Germanic Christmas ritual.

The eastern-most side of the doorway has fewer burn marks than the western side, these number approximately four, and are not teardrop in shape, but longer scorch marks, again appearing to cross seasoning cracks. It is worth observing that there is partial destruction of the lower part of the doorway, in part due to old woodworm infestation which has degraded the surface significantly. As a result, there is some loss of timber depth, making it impossible to ascertain if there were further scorching events. (fig. 8)

Figure 8 West wing doorway degraded timber, Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: author.



²² Champion (2017).

The posterior surface of the doorway into the west wing would have faced into the private withdrawing space/solar and probable bedchamber c.1300-1600, which is also the current museum's 17th-century interpretation. Here the timber framing is also marked with taper burns. **(fig. 9)** The eastern-most jamb features four longer scorch marks, which are not the typical teardrop shape, being elongated along their main axis. The western-most side again shows the highest concentration of marks, numbering approximately twelve separately applied burning events - including a carefully constructed group of four evenly sized burn marks. This group of four burns partially wrap around the bottom of a ledge which once held the original wooden or metal door latch. It is likely that this group would have been located next to the bed and its occupants, given the orientation of the room and the position of the windows and door into a further chamber.

There is a further 13th-century doorway to the eastern wing. Here the burn marks are only concentrated on the interior jambs which face into the bedchamber, and there are no corresponding marks which face into the public area of the Great Hall. The eastern wing consists of only one room, which is an intact 13th-century bedchamber which contains the largest concentration of surviving medieval framework. **(figs. 10, 11)** The original 13th-century roofline can be ascertained owing to the survival of a roof timber, the terminal end of which remains in situ in the eastern most wall.

Here, the highest concentration of burn marks occur on the western-most door jamb, and number approximately ten separate scorching events. These extensive burn marks cross seasoning cracks, and have been distorted by the cracks themselves, indicative of being applied on or shortly after construction. These do not follow the teardrop form being long and deeply scorched, they are of probable 13th century date. There is also an intact planked door with 17th-century metalwork hinges and latch that is devoid of any burn events, though it bears the remnants of various paint colors that once covered it. The burn marks in the



Figure 9 Taper burns west doorway facing into bedchamber, Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: author.

east wing also seem to be sited where a bed would probably have been positioned. Once again this is the museum's current display, and, given the room configuration and further doorway (presumably originally to the medieval wardrobe), this would seem a logical interpretation.



Figure 10 East doorway with taper burns facing bedchamber, Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: author.



Figure 11 Taper burn east wing doorway facing into bedchamber, Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: author.

There are further burn marks located on the ground-floor timbers, although these are less defined in nature, and have a discreet spatial distribution being found solely in the kitchen area. Timothy Easton has noted that taper burns are rarely found in a ground-floor context,²³ however, this may be, in part, because kitchens are subject to more modification and repeat decoration than other domestic areas, with their walls tending to be lime-washed on an annual basis.

The kitchen taper burns differ significantly to those found on the first-floor doorways. Here they are confined to the supporting lintels above the three-and -four-light mullioned windows. As these are 17th century, the taper burns can be securely dated to that period, more precisely to the 1614-1618 renovations. The taper burn marks are concentrated on the reused oak timber framing, comprising the window lintel, some of which is socketed, and although these have not been dated by dendrochronology, it is likely that these are reused medieval timbers. The scorch marks on the timbers do not conform to the teardrop shape of the other marks within the building. It suggests that these timbers have been marked in situ following the renovations and modernizations in the early 17th century. With the timbers in a horizontal position, the teardrop shape would have been impossible to replicate.



Figure 12 South window, kitchen, Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: author.

²³ Easton, pp. 56-60.

The south window has taper burns which have been applied to both right and left sides of the supporting lintels, and the east-facing mullioned window has burn marks found only on the left or north side of the timbers. (**fig. 13**) These timber lintels show no evidence of repeat marking. It is probable that, because these timbers had been plastered over, repeat marking was unable to be performed.

Further taper burns within the kitchen space which are sited at a high level on timber framing exposed some ten feet/three meters up on the through passage entrance. These potential taper burns overlay a trio of partial, inscribed hexafoils. It is difficult to tell; they may be patina of the particular timberwork rather than scorch marks, but it is almost impossible to gain a clear view of the marks in order to reach any definite conclusion.

Discussion

The spatial distribution of the taper burns at Donington le Heath demonstrates two main principles. Firstly, that they are sited at thresholds, namely doors and windows. These points are considered liminal space and therefore vulnerable to attack by malign forces.²⁴ Secondly, that the main concentration of the taper burns is found within bedchambers, and, if the interpretation of the rooms is correct, the taper burns are positioned close to where the occupants would have slept. The issue of liminality is an important construct in understanding the grammar and syntax of the dwelling place. Johnson argues that the dwelling can be viewed and understood as a microcosm, and as such it has manifest limits

²⁴ M. Champion, "Magic on the Walls: Ritual Protection Marks in the Medieval Church" in R. Hutton (ed.), *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); C.R. Auge, "Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England 1620-1725" (unpublished PhD diss., University of Montana, 2013); M. Johnson, *An Archaeology of Capitalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996);) C.M. Manning, *Homemade Magic: Concealed Deposits in Architectural Contexts in the Eastern United States* (unpublished MA, thesis, Ball State University, Indiana, 2012).



Figure 13 Taper burn, south kitchen window, Donington le Heath, Leicestershire. Photo: author.

and delineated space “borders (that) had to be maintained...there were threats of disorder and mayhem outside the household.”²⁵

The taper burns at Donington le Heath manor house show a peak concentration around the liminal space of doorways that border onto bedchambers. Wright suggests that this was meant to protect sleepers are at their most vulnerable from attack by malign forces and witchcraft.²⁶ Sleeping also rendered the person vulnerable to demonic possession, drawing the attentions, in particular, of incubi and succubi. During sleep, the Devil himself, was believed to steal the semen from males and use it to impregnate witches. The fear that such events could be carried out unbeknown to the sleeper, precipitated the need for ritual and

²⁵ Johnson, p. 160.

²⁶ J. Wright, “Ritual Protection Marks and Witchcraft at Knole, Kent,” Gresham College Lecture: Museum of London, 2016.

spiritual protection in whatever form.²⁷ This is emphasised by Easton who studied several properties in Eastern and South East England and found the same spatial distribution of taper or candle burns.²⁸ These were particularly noted on ceilings, and here complex patterns and symbols were drawn in scorch marks, unfortunately the ceilings at Donington le Heath are all modern replacements and so no parallels can be drawn.

It was not just the physical architecture of bedchambers that was marked by scorch marks, furniture was also marked apotropaically. A surviving example of a high-status bed, the marriage bed of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, had ritual burn marks on one of the bedposts.²⁹ This contradicts Easton and Duck who both posit a purely 17th-century origin for the use of burn marks as apotropaia.

Champion has recently surveyed three high-status buildings in respect of type and spatial distribution of burn marks, Gainsborough Old Hall, Knole, and Sissinghurst, all of which showed a similar pattern of marking timbers. Taper burns were found in significant volumes, numbering more than one hundred in most of the buildings.³⁰ What has emerged from this recent field work are two significant findings: the practice of marking timber with scorch marks is known from securely dated contexts from the 13th century onwards and that many taper burns appear to have been applied either during construction or within the first year, given the appearance of seasoning cracks.

Buildings were considered susceptible to both fire and lightning strikes, and Easton has suggested that marking the doorways and doors with a controlled flame acted as a form of protective “inoculation.”³¹ However, the use of taper burns likely reflects to be far-more complex belief system than one where the folk/sympathetic magic is the only explanation.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Easton, pp. 56-60.

²⁹ <http://www.thehistoryvault.co.uk/henry-vii-and-elizabeth-of-yorks-marriage-bed-rediscovered/> (Accessed 01/02/17)

³⁰ Matthew Champion, pers comm, 2016.

³¹ Easton, pp. 56-60.

That taper burns are purely a protection against fire and lightening, seems overly simplistic. It does not explain the spatial distribution of marks and density of marking practices within bedchambers. If fire protection was the only aim of deliberately marking timber, then the distribution pattern would be randomized and not show the same degree of concentrated marking behavior as found at Donington le Heath manor house.

One of the main questions to arise out of recent fieldwork, and, in particular, at Donington le Heath, is why people chose to mark not only their dwellings, but sacred architecture, barns, byres, and stables. What was inherent in society that drove mark making behavior and the need to protect the individual and their immediate environment from perceived threats and harm?

No exorcism harm thee! Nor no witchcraft charm thee! Ghosts unlaid forbear thee!
Nothing ill come near thee!

William Shakespeare *Cymbeline* Act IV Sc II

Mark making can only ever be examined within the wider context of the period in which the marks were created which, in the case of many of the marks recorded at Donington le Heath, was the 17th century; a period of religious and societal turmoil. Matthew Johnson describes it as a period “religious radicalism” with Calvinist Protestantism as one of the main drivers which established capitalism across north-west Europe.³² This new economic wealth impacted both on the architecture and material culture of a society emerging from the last throes of feudalism. These new social conditions and aspirational modalities increased tensions within households and an emergent class structure which relied far less on the absolutism of the medieval feudal system.

Donington in the 17th century was a house of Johnson’s “middling sort” – a lower gentry house, an emergent middle class household, well-connected, but without significant

³² Johnson (1996), p. 6.

status. It was a polite, if old-fashioned dwelling. Donington manor in the late 16th century was owned by John Digby, uncle to Everard Digby who was executed in 1606 for his part in the ill-fated Gunpowder Plot. Everard Digby had been converted to Catholicism by the Jesuit John Gerard, and Everard's cousin, Ann Vaux, was known to aid Catholic priests during the Reformation by establishing safe houses for them. It is not clear if Donington was a Catholic household at this time, but the application of so-called Marian Marks and Christograms upon clearly 17th-century building fabric would imply that its sympathies certainly lay in that direction.

Religious intolerance, uncertainty and flux, created such a degree of tension that the need to adhere to established cultural practices was necessary. Particularly to mediate against harm, offer spiritual comfort, and to give continuity and purpose. Mark making and the application of taper burns would have created a degree of certainty and comfort.

The post-Reformation period and its rigid suppression of Catholicism and specifically the iconoclasm and rejection of idolatry, would have driven the need to personally affirm spiritual connections and an adherence to the Old Religion. The rise of Puritanism and the decline of Catholicism also impacted significantly on the role of women and saw their role eroded and diminished.³³ Women could be fined for challenging the male hierarchy, they became scolds, and gossips and witches, and ultimately objects of derision and fear.³⁴

Therefore, the continued use of marking buildings with tapers or candles may be part of a deeper grammar and lexicon of belief. Women may have marked their homes with burns as a form of passive resistance; marks were there to provide solidarity and as a conspicuous symbol that challenged the male hierarchy. Within Donington it may, at least partially explain why there is a bias towards taper burns and bedchambers as gendered space. Johnson

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

argues that bedchambers were predominantly spheres of female influence, rites of passage such as childbirth saw the exclusion of males for set periods defined by custom and the church.³⁵ The Catholic ritual of Churching women was one of the many church ceremonies that saw the use of lit tapers as part of the purification rite, therefore it seems entirely possible that these rituals made the physical and spiritual leap from sacred to secular practice.

However, the religious and spiritual explanation of taper burn marks is only the polite veneer to what is essentially a multi-layered and complex set of beliefs. The fear of witchcraft and malign intent was also an ever-present fear. Auge, in her unpublished PhD thesis discusses the role of boundaries and liminal space and the need for these to be protected. In exploring the notion of liminal space she argues that these boundaries are the “literal and metaphysical thresholds between the living and the dead.” In addition, they represent a constrained zone which is representative of bounded space between the safe and unsafe. These boundaries were “most likely to be re-enforced through the application of magically empowered objects and rituals”³⁶

The use of magic and domestic rituals were seen as a response to the threat and tensions of malign forces and evil intent, which threatened “the weak, the young, the ill, the dead, the unbaptized or uninitiated, and animals” or those that could not easily protect themselves. These lifeways are traditionally seen as managed and overseen by women, birth, death, dairying and domestic animal husbandry were all within the offices of the housewife. This implies that, in certain circumstances and time periods, mark making was a female preserve, although this may be dependent on the spatial analysis of existing marks. The spatial distribution of marks at Donington are concentrated within bedchambers and the kitchen, the taper burns being almost exclusively on the first floor.

³⁵ The custom of Churching and Purification was called *Benedictio mulieris post partum*.

³⁶ Auge, p. 36

The belief that witches existed was certain, the Witchcraft Acts of 1542 and 1563 and 1604 were proof of their physical presence and their undoubted influence upon society. James I himself wrote a treatise against witches and their familiars, his *Daemonologie* published in 1597, identified two forms of malevolent being, those which “troubled through torment” and those that were helpful, such as brownies and gnomes from folklore, though all magical beings were imps of Satan.³⁷

The fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaves of the Devil, the Witches or enchanter, hath moved me (beloved reader) to dispatch in post, this following treatise of mine (...) to resolve the doubting (...) both that such assaults of Satan are most certainly practised, and that the instrument thereof merits most severely to be punished.

Therefore, the use of taper burns and other apotropaic marks within the home could mediate against the baneful influences of witches and indeed turn them away from the homestead and occupants.

A deeper layer as to why people marked their home has connections with British folklore and links to a wider European folkloric tradition and practices. The role of folklore in archaeology has traditionally been marginalized, and seen as too-fringe and unscientific, with the data not rigorous enough to withstand scrutiny. Nonetheless, there is a wealth of data to collect that will allow insight into both the medieval and 17th-century mindsets, that may lead to understanding what influenced people to mark make as a protective set of signs and symbols.

Manning, in his unpublished MA thesis, draws heavily on European folkloric tradition, and posits that ritual marks as well as being there to “repel evil, witchcraft, mischievous or malignant non-human beings, disease and injury, fire, lightening and

³⁷ King James I and VI, *Daemonologie, In Forme of a Dialogue, Divided into three Books: By the High and Mighty Prince, James &c* (Edinburgh, 1597); for a general overview of medieval and early modern attitudes to magic see: R. Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), & K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1979).

hailstorms, infertility, bad luck and general misfortune” also have the opposite effect.³⁸

Marks and burns can also represent another covert grammar designed instead to attract good luck and benevolent spirits, that brought good fortune and fertility and the usual tenets of wealth, health, and happiness.

Manning also underlines that the material everyday world cannot be separated from either the religious world, nor that of the supernatural world, they are all interwoven and inseparable. Thus, the factors that drove people to mark make represent a complex set of cultural practices and in respect of taper burns and candle marks, are both an act of “domestic religiosity” and also represent a mediation between the natural and supernatural worlds.

With the taper burns at Donington le Heath, there is clearly a common domestic ritual being carried out, this ritual is demonstrated in both the surviving 13th century features and the 17th century modernizations. Perhaps what we are seeing is the continuation of a widely accepted and understood practice of protecting both the home and the occupants from harm. There appears to be a strong correlation with increased marking in the westernmost chambers, however caution does need to be exercised in respect of the bias in the fabric of the standing building. Further surveying and recording of other vernacular buildings is required to ascertain if this a common practice or whether Donington is unique in this respect. 🐼

³⁸ Manning, p. 12.