

Concealed Shoes

by Christine Bury



Be honest now. How many pairs of shoes do you own and what do you do with them when they wear out or they are no longer fashionable or they have got too small or too large for your feet? I have had favourite ones repaired over and over again until they fall apart and are thrown out. Other shoes I have given to charity shops. What I have not done is conceal one or more of them around the house. This, though, is what happened to the well-worn child's shoe on display in the Cabinet of Curiosities in the Research Room of Emsworth Museum.

The much repaired child's shoe was among several items donated to the Emsworth Maritime & Historical Trust by George and Emily (Fenella) Cassedy. Mrs Cassedy has recently given the items to the Trust as an outright gift. In 1991 her late husband began to restore the striking old house on the corner of Queen Street (No.1) and King Street (No.2). George had retired and, with more time to spare, he set out to learn more about the house, its history and the way it was built.

A well was found under the kitchen floorboards and tricorne hats (also in the Museum) were found in a bedroom. The leather shoe was found squashed flat beneath loose panelling under a window seat. Like the tricorne hats, the child's shoe is thought to date from around 1790/1810.

Why was it concealed?

Surprisingly enough it is not unusual to find a hidden shoe, usually well worn, in an old building that is being restored. Shoes belonging to both adults and children have been found in chimney breasts, within walls, under window sills, over door lintels, behind wainscoting or beneath floorboards. The practice appears to have been quite widespread throughout the UK and overseas in Europe, Australia and North America. No one knows the exact reason for the concealment. If found near an entry point to a home, the intention may have been to ward off evil spirits. A child's shoe may have been seen as a fertility or good luck symbol or as a grieving parents' memorial to a lost child. A well-worn shoe holds the imprint of the wearer's foot and may have been thought of as holding a spiritual presence. A find can be of one or a group of single shoes. Such shoes can be of different dates suggesting several concealments often years apart. Shoes were very expensive and were handed down, repaired and altered. Their life was prolonged as far as possible.

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Who hid them?

Were they hidden by builders, landlords or tenants? This practice appears to have primarily lasted from the early 1700s to the late 19th century. No contemporary written records have been found recording these concealed artefacts. June Swann, the former keeper of the Boot and Shoe Collection at Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, wrote in 1996 that she *“eventually realised that....the secrecy continually encountered suggests that the superstition, if disclosed, ceases to be effective”*.

The Northampton Museum collects concealed shoe find information to add to an index which helps researchers into this fascinating field of historical superstition and dress. To date the collection has recorded more than 3000 finds.

Sources:

1 Queen Street/2 King Street – Unusual House – Unusual ‘Finds’ by Emily Cassedy and Dorothy Bone in *The Emsworth Echo*, Issue No. 45, November 2013
Concealed Shoe Revealed, Northampton Museum and Art Gallery
Blog, The Mystery of Concealed Shoes, National Museums Scotland

Correction

Following the publication of the Concealed Shoes article, Mrs Cassedy contacted the editor to let the Museum know that the child’s shoe on display in the Cabinet of Curiosities is not the one found by her husband. That shoe was returned to its hiding place. This begs the question: Whose shoe is on display in the Museum?

We apologise to Mrs Cassedy for any inconvenience caused.