

B. Burn marks

There is much debate on the origin of burn marks on timbers in buildings of the 16th and 17th century. There is a huge wealth of evidence of their presence in Hoxne. All buildings except two had them. One had been over restored by sand-blasting whilst the other was an 18th century infill and rebuild of a much older larger building subdivided in the 18th century. They could be just a result of the careless placing of candle, taper or rush light flames. If so, it is a miracle that the house is still standing today as it would have been burn down. In Hoxne they are found:

- Along Bressummer beams above fireplaces
- On door frames and doors about half way down
- On other horizontal and vertical timbers and beams
- Great clusters are found upstairs

In 54-53 Low Street downstairs there are:

1 in the cellar (door frame)

25 on the ground floor (mainly around the bressummer but also two inverted on a door)

38 upstairs concentrated mostly in two central rooms around the fire place and on beams

Some occur in clusters of more commonly three or sometimes five

They are deep, the charcoal has been scratched out in places

Sometimes they are associated with other marks like the Marian marks

Similar upstairs clusters are seen at 16 Cross Street upstairs, Beech Cottage (Low Street), Yew Tree House (Church Hill), The Swan and Locks Pyghtle (Thorpe Abbott).

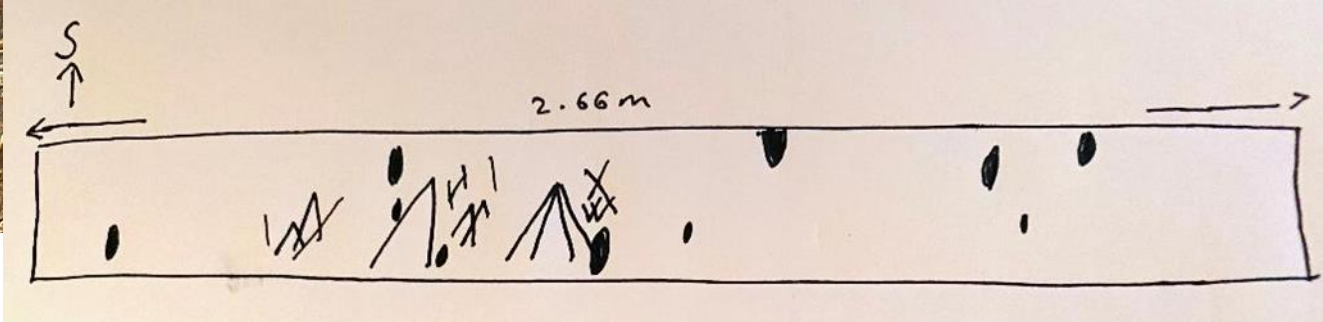




54 Low Street door. Inverted burn marks



77 Low Street burn marks scraped out and distribution of burn marks on Bressummer





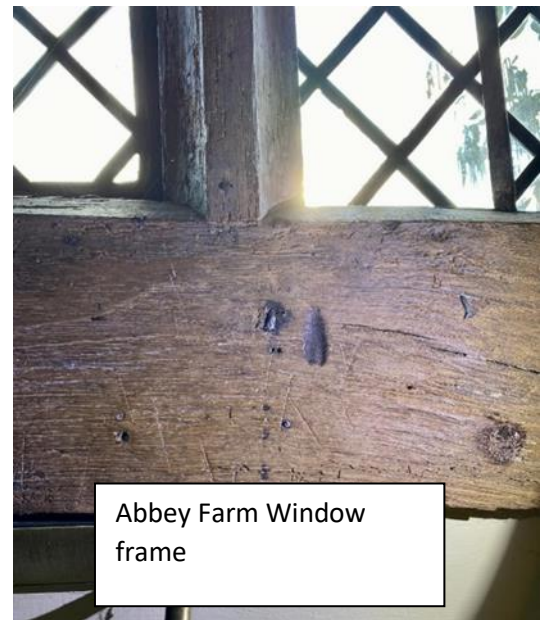
Beech Cottage upstairs



Yew Tree Cottage upstairs



The Swan, upstairs. The burn has been scraped out



A house made of timber and thatch is a tinder box just waiting to burn down. Likewise there is a fear of being struck by lightning. Tie this in with our 16th and 17th fear of witches doing the devil's work and a range of evil spirits there is something maybe more ritual in these marks, protection marks. This would be the inoculation of timbers against the risk of fire by ritual burning. It would explain the many burns around fireplaces when there would be no need for lighting. Likewise, barring entry to harmful spirits around windows and doors. Then we come on to the huge clusters of burn marks upstairs in the bedroom. Alison Fearn wrote a compelling PHD thesis on this based upon burn marks at Donnington Le Heath in Leicestershire.

“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.”

She suggests 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.

The taper burns at Donnington le Heath manor house also show a peak concentration around the 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. 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 spiritual protection in whatever form.

The 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. 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.