


The “witch marks” of Hoxne

1. Introduction

Go back in time to the 16th and 17th century in Hoxne. It’s night time, there are no street lights, the darkness closes in. People close out the darkness in their homes. Life was punctuated by everyday hazards, disease, risky childbirth, fire, flood, lightning. Many of these risks were out of the control or understanding of the individual and it was easy to imagine and blame a supernatural cause and solution to them. Tie this in with a mania that blamed these unfortunate incidents on those on the margins of our society who did not quite fit in, a scapegoat whom you could point the finger of blame at – the very real mania of the witch persecutions which reached its height in the 17th century but still had its presence in at least the century either side of that date.

It wasn’t just the witches that could be blamed, evil spirits and ghosts permeated the harmony of the home, particularly at night, in the dark, in those shadowy areas, in the bedchamber as we slept. Protection was sought in prayers, charms and marks – the “witch marks” which are a focus of this talk and my study. The excerpt on the right is from a book regarding witchcraft by Francis Hutchinson, a former Vicar of Hoxne.



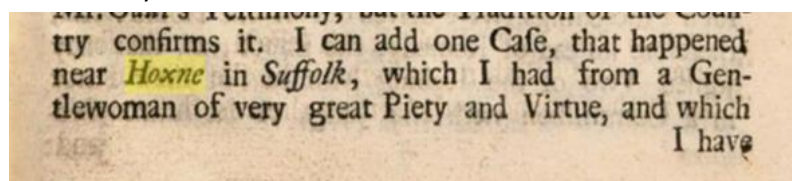
only sure Rule, tho’ they give us many Instances of the Employment both of the Good and Evil Spirits, they teach us none such as we commonly meet with in the Modern Relations of Witchcraft. For the vulgar Opinion is, that the Devil is something like a Man, but with Tail, and Claws, and Horns, and a Cloven-Foot. The Narratives, tell us, that he makes *Compacts* with the Witches, and lies with them, and sucks their Blood : And that at their bidding, he kills Children and Cattel, and sinks Ships by Sea, and carries them to foreign Meetings, where they Revel with other Witches, and Drink up the Wine in Princes Cellars : Now the Holy Scriptures tell us no such Tales as these, nor any Thing like them. And howsoever some take Pains to join the Scripture Relations, and these, as close as they can together ; in my Opinion, they do Religion no Service by it. They

Two Vicars in Hoxne had an influence on beliefs and hysteria:

1. Edward Willan (Vicar of Hoxne 1646- 1692) was the principal witness and interrogator of women suspected of witchcraft in the Hopkins Witch Trials of 1645 to 1647.
2. Francis Hutchinson (Vicar of Hoxne 1692-1706) he wrote “An historical Essay Concerning Witchcraft: With Observations Upon Matters” published in 1717

In his book he tried to distance thoughts and beliefs from the idea of witches. Some of these ideas he would have come up against in his time as vicar in Hoxne as a reaction to his predecessor’s persecutions.

Hoxne woman accused of witchcraft during Reverend Willan’s incumbency:



... confirms it. I can add one Case, that happened near **Hoxne** in *Suffolk*, which I had from a Gentlewoman of very great Piety and Virtue, and which I have

I have heard confirmed by many others. She said, when the Witchfinders came into that Neighbourhood, they had one Woman under Tryal, who, she verily believed was innocent; but being kept long fasting, and without Sleep, she confests'd and called her Imp *Nan*. This good Gentlewoman told me, that her Husband, (a very learned ingenious Gentleman) having Indignation at the Thing, he and she went to the House, and put the People out of Doors, and gave the poor Woman some Meat, and let her go to Bed, and when she had slept, and was come to herself, she knew not what she had confests'd, and had nothing she called *Nan*, but a Pullet, that she sometimes called by that Name.

Hoxne appeared lucky with respect to these persecutions, nobody was executed. Other villages around were not so fortunate. Many witches were hung at Bury St Edmunds if they survived the witchfinder trials but were found guilty of witchcraft.

Amongst all this hysteria people sought to protect their houses from witches, spirits and devils. At this point, I want to move away from the term “**Witch Mark**”. These marks in our houses were NOT made by witches! These marks represent themselves as a variety of prayers, hopes, fears, protective charms and are known

more accurately as **apotropaic marks** or ritual **protection marks**.

These apotropaic marks are interwoven with our Hoxne history. They are marks which many modern researchers like Matt Champion, Timothy Easton and Brain Hoggard are experts and authorities upon these matters. There are very little contemporary written accounts of the practices to draw upon and so there is fierce debate on their meanings. This Hoxne study records a huge bank of these marks and will try to explain some of their potential meanings. They appear to be practices outside of the mainstream Medieval and Reformed Church in England but not within the realm of occult – they are folk practices somewhere in between.

Ritual numbers

Number did have a significance in ritual protection:

3 – Trinity (often used in some marks)

4 – The 4 gospels

5 – The five wounds of Christ

7 – The seven Sacraments of the Church

After the reformation (begun in 1534) the more “Catholic” numbers (5&7) were less used and there was more an influence on 3.

Shakespeare would have been very familiar with the popular ideas regarding magic. The number three often runs through scenes associated with witchcraft:

From MacBeth:

First Witch

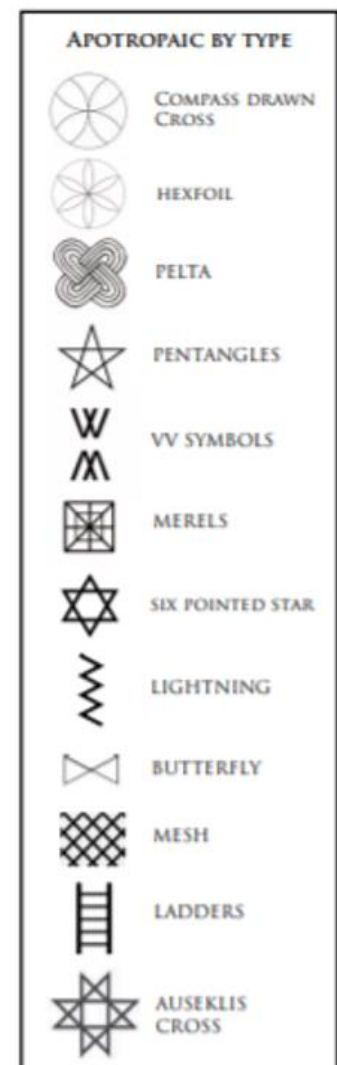
Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

Second Witch

Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined.

Third Witch

Harpier cries 'Tis time, 'tis time.



2. Locations and examples of apotropaic marks in Hoxne

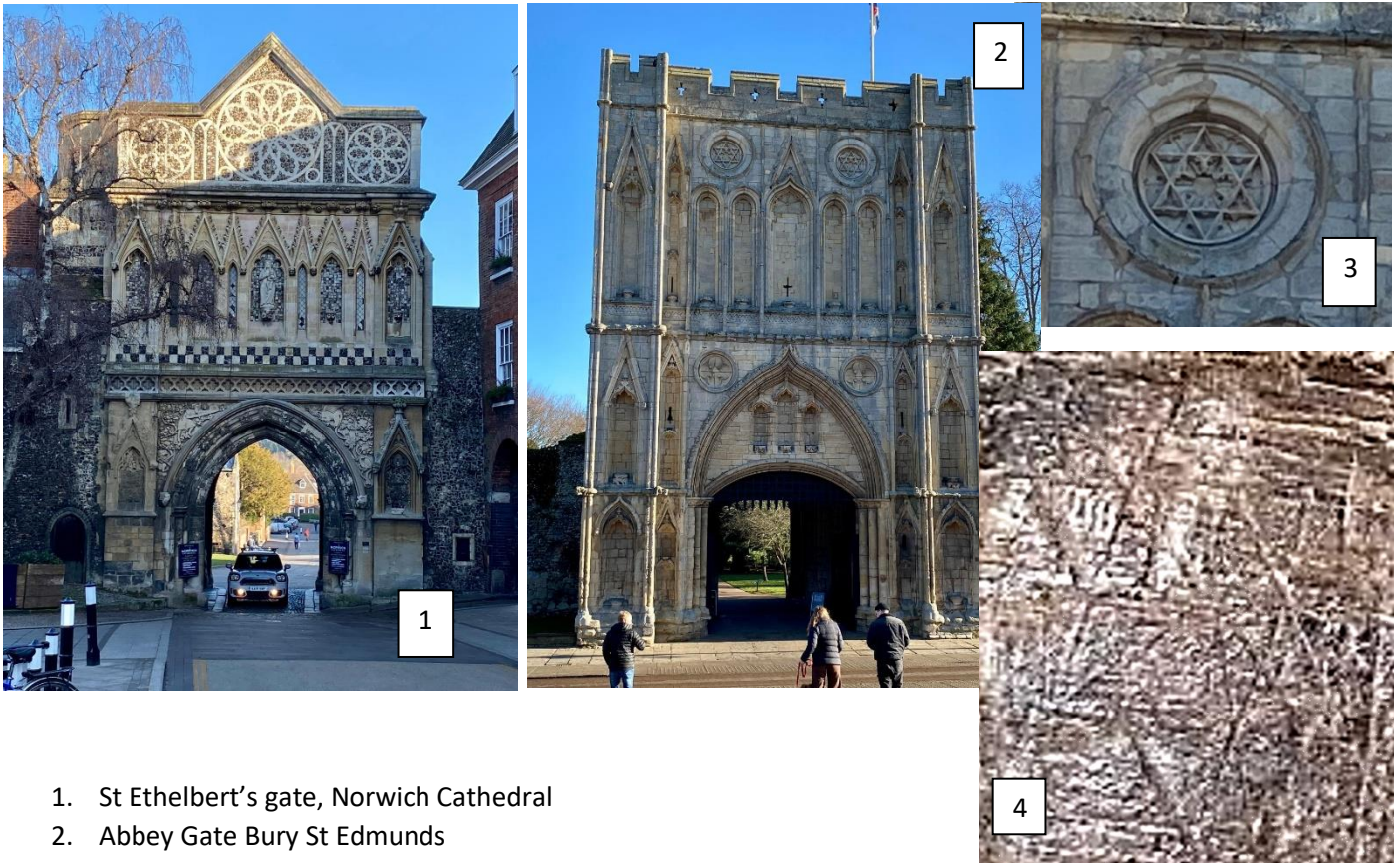
If these marks are to ward off the spells, visits and attacks of witches and evil spirits they need to close off any entrance to the house though which they can enter. This would include:

1. Chimneys
2. Doors
3. Windows

They would also be where people slept and gave birth.

4. Bed chambers

When we look around, these symbols are very obvious on Church buildings:



1. St Ethelbert's gate, Norwich Cathedral
2. Abbey Gate Bury St Edmunds
3. Detail on the Abbey gate
4. Seal of Solomon – 53 Low Street