



News and events

- **YouTube.** If you haven't already done so, it is worth searching YouTube for 'Wheathampstead'. Mike Smith's 'The changing face of the High Street' has had more than 3,600 views in the last few years and a new video 'Old Wheathampstead' by Felix Ceconi appeared about nine months ago.
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=wheathampstead
- **Next meeting: Wednesday 16 February.** The subject of the talk is not yet decided but please put the date in your diary and we will let you know nearer the time.

Burn marks at The Bull



The marks in these photographs are on the mantle over the fireplace in The Bull. The mantle is part of the original 16th century timber frame of the building. Though

the beam has been stained and polished, the marks are burn marks of a kind that is relatively common in historic buildings, dating from anywhere from the late 13th to the mid-19th centuries. They are more obvious on lighter-coloured timber which has not been painted or stained, always have a characteristic tear shape, and are sometimes found with the charring still present.

Archaeologists such as James Wright of Triskele Heritage have made detailed studies of these marks and have explored various explanations of their presence. It has been suggested, for example, that they are scorch marks left by unattended rushlights or candles. This explanation is discounted (a) because there are no holes into which a candle or rushlight pricket would have been inserted (b) because many of the marks are found in places where lighting would not be needed.

Another suggested explanation is that they are marks left by testing the heat of a hot poker before using it to mull ale. This can also be dismissed on the basis that, while marks are found in kitchens and living rooms, they are also found on the backs of doors, on window frames, and even on roof purlins.

James Wright and others have carried out experiments to ascertain how the marks could have been made. They found that deliberately

holding a taper, rushlight or candle at an angle of 45 degrees to the timber for at least 10 minutes produced a mark with the characteristic tear shape. This took time and patience, ruling out the possibility that the marks were made by accident.

Wright's preferred explanation is that these marks are 'apotropaic', i.e. that they were made with the intention of averting the forces of evil.

Folk beliefs about the connection between using fire to protect from evil go back many centuries, as exemplified in the use of candles in church services both pre- and post-Reformation.

James Wright writes: "*To the early modern mind, the threat of evil was all-pervasive – an incarnate Satan was harnessing his minions to endanger the souls of the Christian faithful.*" This threat included the physical threat posed to buildings by evil spirits.

Many burn marks such as those at The Bull are found in locations where evil spirits might enter a building, including doors and windows and particularly chimneys and hearths (including at Ye Olde Fighting Cocks in St Albans), as well as in dark spaces such as stairwells and attics. Some may have been made by practitioners of magic who would have been paid for their services.



For James Wright's complete blog about medieval burn marks, go to <https://triskeleheritage.triskelepublishing.com/mediaeval-mythbusting-blog> and scroll down to blog 8.