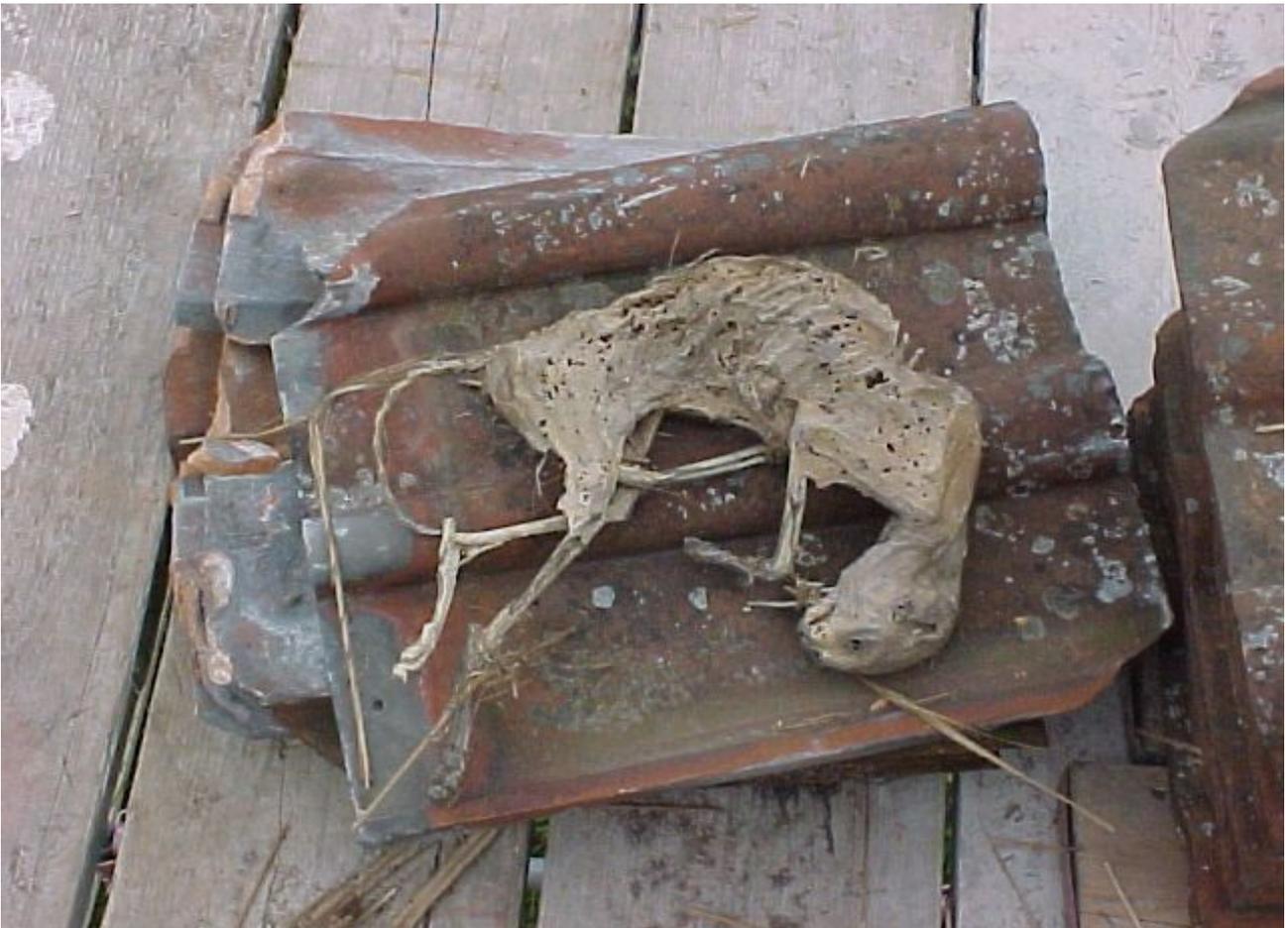


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Two cases of folk magic in Congresbury

**YATTON, CONGRESBURY, CLAVERHAM AND CLEEVE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH
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A fire charm from Congresbury

Two cases of folk magic from Congresbury

Congresbury (and Yatton) parishes have a rich history of folk magic and folklore. The folklore surrounding the hill fort of Cadbury is a case in point.

A lady from Congresbury, a small girl in the late 1940s, on a hot picnic day on Cadbury Hill, in an area where there was 'bracken' and out in the open, saw a green man. She described the sighting thus

'At a distance of probably a hundred yards standing in the waist high bracken was a very strange figure.. he or it seemed to tower over the surrounding greenery. The upper torso and head were a distinct recognisable shape, but the lower part of the body was merged into or hidden by dense vegetation. The head was encased in an untidy helmet of leaves, which framed a dark featureless plane of a face which seemed to stare in our direction. The shoulders were clearly outlined but were concealed under a cloak of darker leaves. I remember feeling a tremor of fear caused.. by its total immobility and a blank intensity in the featureless dark face'

Years later, she saw a 'green man' carving in a church, and recognised him as what she had seen on the hill.

According to Keith Gardner (MS notes on the 1959 excavations in the Gardner archive) 'Local tradition knows the central motte (tree clump) as the 'Roman Camp' and a flat slab of rock on the south west approach track as 'The Devil's stone'.

Keith was a very local man, and had the gift of making people talk, and I suspect this is genuinely something he was told.

According to Ruth Tongue, writing in 1965:

'There is a vague tradition that on May Day, or Midsummer Day, which is the festival, the Congresbury women used to process round the well at Southwells Farm (1) barking like dogs. The conger eels of the nearby Severn Sea are credited with barking, and there may be a trace here of a fisherman's cult.

On the other hand, such a dance may be one of the Cadbury Hill witch rites still remembered. Apparently Black Magic was practised there on May Eve and Midsummer less than a hundred years ago. Mrs. Clifton, Crowcombe, November 1959 The Rev. W. Griffin, Angersleigh, January, 1960.'

The green man is a truly strange story. It is possible for sleep-like modes of consciousness to develop, especially when we are tired, or drunk, or on hot days, when dream images can pass across the face of the waking world. This has happened to me in the past: I hallucinated a man in a cloak and large-brimmed hat stood in a hedge in Wedmore, when driving home shattered and drunk, one hot summer night back in about 1979. But where would the little girl have acquired such imagery?

It should be no surprise that in a landscape so suffused with folklore, that instances of folk magic would not be surprising in the district.

The mummified cat

In 2007, a visit to a Listed farm house on the Congresbury to Wrington road was made to monitor works in hand. The farmhouse had a number of fascinating 17th century features, such as this elegant clasped hinge (Fig 1)

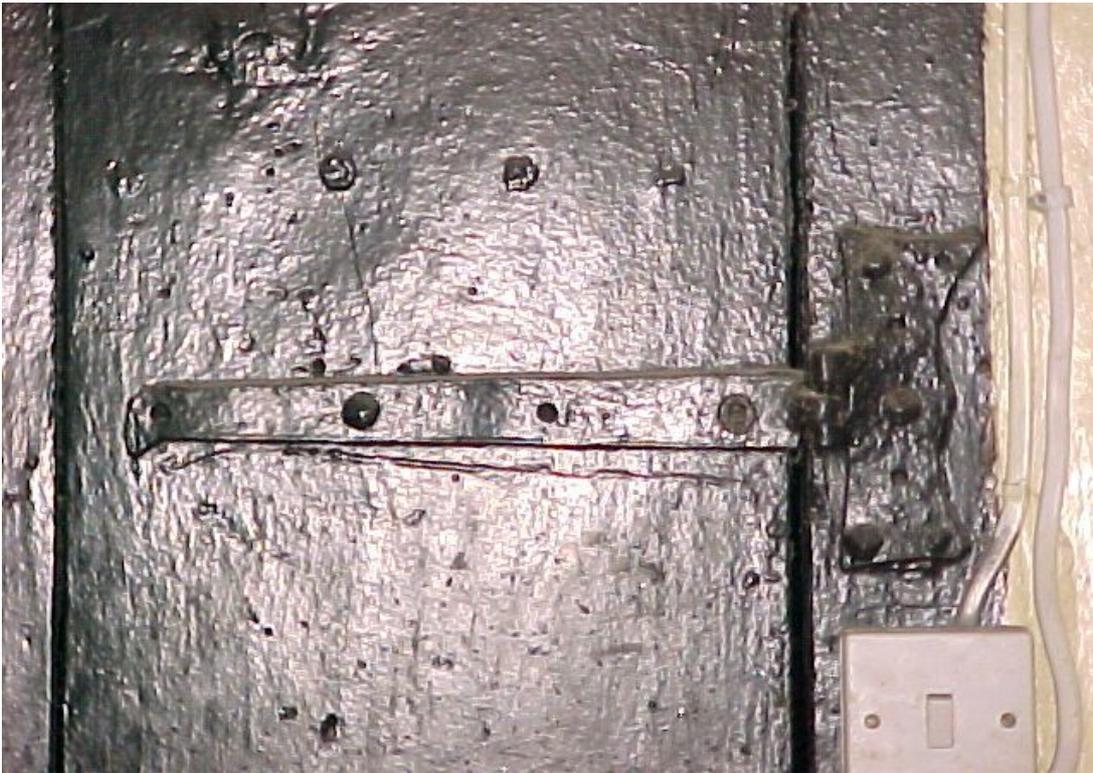


Fig 1: 17th century hinge (and not so elegant light switch!)



Fig 2: Detail of roof timber joints

The timber roof (also of 17th century date) was thatched, but the roof had been raised, probably in the 19th century, and the thatch remained.

It was during the works to remove this thatch that a mummified cat was found (Fig 3 below).

Such finds of mummified cats in roofs are not uncommon, and the general consensus seems to be that they are a charm to protect the house from fire (or perhaps from vermin: the latter seems to make more sense, but the former reason is given far more often).

This folk practice might well have laid its practitioner open to accusations of witchcraft had it been known (a very real and serious possibility at the time).



Fig 3: The first mummified cat found – a second was found in the other wing of the building

Such cats are generally adult, and do not appear to have been injured or killed – certainly this one had not been. After discussions with the owner, at least one of the cats was returned to the roof afterwards.

A protective bible charm

The second case is darker, and quite unsettling. It was found written into the front of a family bible dating from 1815, and the writing (see Fig 4) is of a date not too long afterwards.

It reads

'This Document Purgeth / fform That Lieth Under the hazell / Bush That is never / Quiet nor at Rest/ Before the fate / of What Hath Lasted / in the name of the father / and of the Sun and of / the Holly Ghost Amen'

This unusual document seems to be a charm to lay or bind some ghost or spectre, and the mention of the hazel bush under which it lies perhaps implies this is a restless human ghost. The tone of the charm certainly has a sound of desperation to it.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to research this on-line to see just how common such charms are, as the mountain of information available on the bible overwhelms any sensible query.

This Verment Turgey
Gloom That Lieth
Under The hazell
Bush That is never
Livid nor at Red
Before The Fate
of What Hath
in the name of the father
and of the Gun and of
the Scollis Ghost Am

Fig 4: The bible inscription

These two examples of folk magic from the 17th and 19th centuries are probably only the tip of the iceberg: in the uncertain pre-technical countryside, such magical practices were almost certainly far more common.