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RITUAL PROTECTION MARKS IN WOOKEY HOLE AND LONG HOLE, SOMERSET

by

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ABSTRACT

The Witch's Chimney in Wookey Hole contains the largest concentration of ritual protection marks so far discovered in any cave. These are described and the growth of the folk narrative of the Witch of Wookey Hole is examined to place the marks in their social context. A poem by James Jennings, The Mysteries of Mendip or the Lost Lady provides a possible link between Wookey Hole and Long Hole. This is examined and a possible origin for the practice of banishing ghosts to the Red Sea is suggested.

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, etched symbols discovered in Goatchurch Cavern, a cave in Burrington Combe, were identified by the current authors (Binding, Wilson and Easton, 2004) as ritual protection marks of the type more commonly found in timbered buildings dating from the period 1550 to 1750. Shortly afterwards, similar examples were also found in Long Hole, Cheddar Gorge.

On 21 June 2007, a search was conducted in Wookey Hole, and a large concentration of engravings, clearly identifiable as ritual protection marks, was found in a small aven in the area of the Third Chamber, known to show-cave guides as The Witch's Chimney.

Numerous small and finely-incised markings are present in this area of the cave, many of which resemble those previously discovered in Goatchurch Cavern and Long Hole. Additional visits to Wookey Hole also identified marks in other areas, although the greatest number of the newly-discovered examples is in the Witch's Chimney itself.

The background to the identification of these types of engraving as ritual protection marks is given in detail in the earlier paper, referred to above, and owes much to the work of Timothy Easton (Easton, 1999 and 2000), who also contributed an Appendix to that paper. In summary, the majority of ritual protection marks are believed to date from the mid 16th to the mid 18th centuries, a period in which there was continued and widespread belief in witchcraft, when people felt the need to resort to protective magic. The use of such marks to provide protection for the occupants of domestic buildings is well-attested (Easton, 1997, 1999 and 2000, Harris, 1999, Roberts, 2003). Such symbols can also be found on stone and other materials but it is not always possible to reach any firm conclusion as to when these were made.

These scribed marks are accurately referred to as apotropaic marks or symbols, and are frequently small, faint and difficult to see. These marks can vary greatly in size and Easton has examples of very obvious marks up to 16 cm in length, although many others are smaller and fainter. The same is true of the markings found in caves. The main engraving in Long Hole is both large and easy to see, as are some of those in Wookey Hole, but there are many other marks in both caves that are very difficult to discern without appropriate lighting.

The marks originally found in Goatchurch Cavern, and later in Long Hole, are mainly of the type identified by Easton as conjoined Vs (Binding, Wilson and Easton, 2004). These

resemble a single scribed W, crossed in the middle, which Easton explains as a conjoined V originally representing *Virgo Virginum* (Virgin of Virgins). In Wookey Hole other marks are also present, some of which may simply be initials, but those found near the entrance and in the Witch's Chimney are believed to be predominantly of a protective nature and these are examined in more detail below.

The existence of a large concentration of these markings in a natural vertical feature such as the Witch's Chimney is unsurprising since in dwellings ritual protection marks are commonly located at points of entry such as doors, windows, chimneys and also staircases. In Goatchurch Cavern the symbols were inscribed in the immediate vicinity of the obstacle known as the Giant's Steps, which serves as a rocky staircase from one level of the cave to another, which has the added characteristic of sporadically issuing a cold draught, a feature which the authors believe to be relevant in this context (Binding, Wilson and Easton, 2004). In Long Hole, the most noticeable of the ritual protection marks is a very obvious conjoined V with some additional embellishment that will also be discussed.

It is worth noting that the area in Wookey Hole where the majority of the ritual protection marks are located is a closed aven, which results in a convection draught caused by the body heat of those standing below it displacing the cooler surrounding air which then descends noticeably. It seems reasonable to suggest that early observers experiencing the appearance of chill draught may have believed this to indicate the presence of some form of evil spirit, which would reinforce their own preconceptions. It is likely that this phenomenon would have been even more pronounced before modifications were made to this feature, namely the removal of the lower part of the rock lip on three sides to allow visitors easier passage through this section of the cave. As will be demonstrated later in this paper, the cave was regularly visited by tourists throughout the period in which protective marks were widely used. The Witch's Chimney is a notable feature in close proximity to the famous stalagmite, and is still pointed out to visitors to this day, and modern visitors have been seen to linger here, staring up at the shapes formed by the rock. It is reasonable to presume that their early counterparts did the same.

A diagram of the Witch's Chimney (Figure 1) shows the approximate position of 40 of the scribed marks, and gives small representations of these, not all of which are illustrated in the text of this paper. The illustrations on this diagram are not to scale, however the majority of the others reproductions are as close to actual size as possible unless otherwise stated.

DISCUSSION

Description of the marks and discussion of possible meanings

In Cheddar Gorge, relevant marks have been found in Long Hole, which is situated immediately above the current show-cave complex of Gough's Cave. Another mark was also found and photographed in Great Oone's Hole, a cave further uphill in the gorge at a higher level, but subsequent visits have failed to locate this particular mark again.

The deeply scored mark in Long Hole (Figure 2) is a conjoined V, incorporating a P on one side, which bears a striking resemblance to a mark recorded by Easton (1999) from the Swan, Worlingworth, (Figure 3) except that there the P is on the right-hand side of the V facing outward, instead on being on the left-hand side facing inwards. A further example of a mark with the P in the same position as the one in Long Hole can be found on the hall fireplace in Boundary Farm, Winston (Easton, 1999, figure 6). The mark in Long Hole is located at the foot of a large aven, 24 m inside the cave, and 2.3 m above floor level, at a bend in the passage

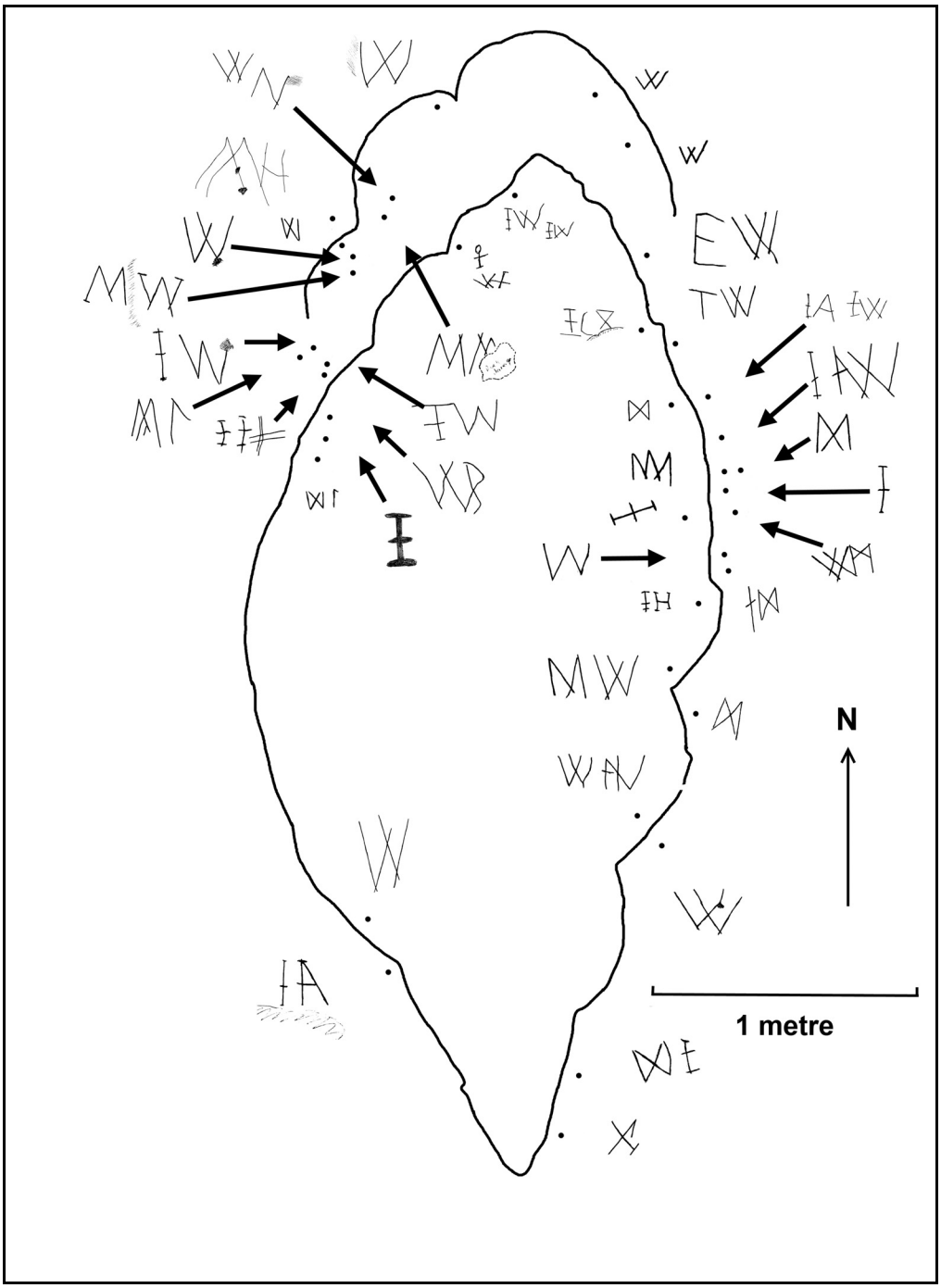


Figure 1. *The Witch's Chimney, Wookey Hole, showing the approximate position of the recorded marks.*

just at the limit of daylight penetration. This follows the same pattern of distribution noticed first in Goatchurch Cavern, where the symbols are in close conjunction with a natural feature in the cave that resembles a chimney, as does the aven in Long Hole. The engraving is approximately 8 cm wide and 5 cm high. It is deeply scored and very easily visible, unlike many of the smaller and finer marks noted in Goatchurch and Wookey Hole.

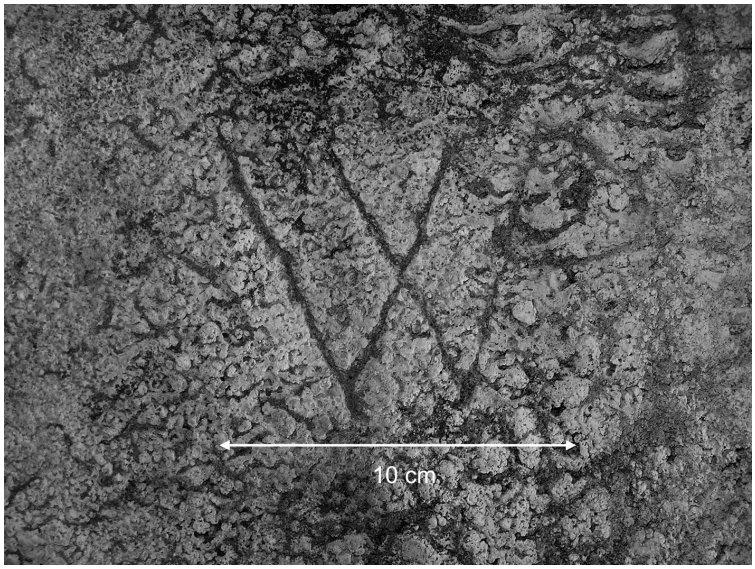


Figure 2. *Conjoined V with P from Long Hole, Cheddar.*
Photo: G.J. Mullan

Easton (1999) speculates on the meaning of the WP symbol. The P bears a close resemblance to the P at the centre of the Christian symbol known as the Chi-Rho, where the P represents the Greek letter R, but as Easton states '… it is unlikely that a 16th or 17th century tradesman would have any knowledge of the transposition from Greek to Latin. In the case of the marks representing the simplified Chi-Rho, the symbol possibly had good luck associations as it had in pre-Christian times. Could the P on its own possibly have an association with *Puella* (a girl) which is sometimes added after a female saint? Alternatively when the P is in close proximity to the M or W could this be an associated pleas for the virgin to bring *Pace* (peace) to the house or work?' It should also be noted in this context that these marks are believed to have pre-Reformation origins (Binding, Wilson and Easton, 2003) and may have a transformed meaning in the post-Reformation period.

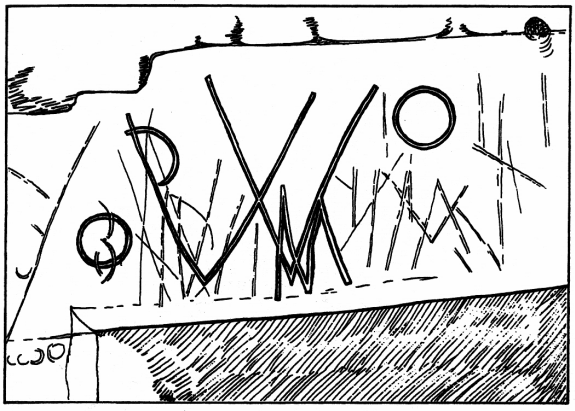


Figure 3. *Conjoined V with P from the Swan at Worlingworth*
After Easton, 1999.

A mark in Great Oone's Hole was first noted three years ago, although a recent visit to the cave failed to relocate it. It is believed to have been near to the entrance and was a conjoined V without further embellishment (Figure 3). The mark was drawn with what appeared to be charcoal on soft moonmilk covering the rock.

In Wookey Hole the first panel of scribed marks is located 6 m inside the entrance to the cave, on the right-hand side of the passage, approximately 1.5 m above the floor. These marks are all finely incised and quite difficult to discern. There are at least three conjoined Vs on a panel, all within approximately 10 cm of each other (Figures 5, 6 and 7). There are also three letters (Figure 8) on the same panel, 10 cm below the conjoined V in Figure 5 and 2.5 cm to the right of it. This comprises a capital I (with a horizontal line crossing the upstroke), in conjunction with an H, followed by a letter resembling a P, which appears to have been converted to an R by the addition of a more lightly engraved stroke. The letters I and H are stylistically very similar, but the third letter, the P or R, appears different and may not have any relationship to the first two letters.

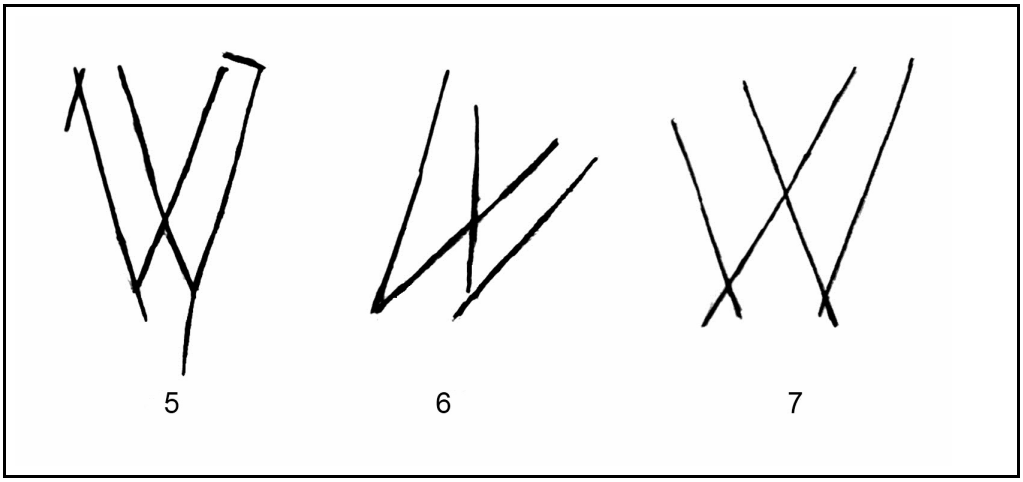
Figure 4. *Conjoined V from Great Oone's Hole.*
Photo: C. Binding.

There are many examples in Wookey Hole of a marking that resembles a capital I, with an extra horizontal line in the middle, as referred to above, which generally appears in combination with other marks, although it has also been found in isolation. In this paper, the symbol ⧺ will be used to represent this mark[1]. The same mark has been noted in other underground sites (Cordingley, 2000) and its significance has been much debated in caving literature. Martin Davies of the Yorkshire Underground Research Team produced some notes on this mark, which are reproduced in an article in the Craven Pothole Club Record (Cordingley, 1999). In brief, the crossed ⧺ in most cases represents the letter J, although Cordingley does give some instances of this mark also being used in conjunction with the letter J.

The letter J, which was not used in Latin, is a late introduction to the alphabet and what is now J was originally written as I. Although English printers had introduced the letter I by the mid 17th century, for other purposes the use of ⧺ to represent it continued for many years. Martin Davies believes that ⧺ 'seems to have been used where a decorative appearance was sought' and he cites examples on embroidered samplers, and on buildings used in conjunction with datestones (Cordingley, 1999).

Cordingley (1999) has a photograph of the letters ⧺H, followed by the image of a bird, carved on the lintel of a 17th century cottage in Kettlewell, North Yorkshire, which is also

[1] The positioning of the crossbar in the representation used in the text of this paper is not to be taken as an accurate representation of the position in any of the actual examples.



Figures 5, 6 & 7. *Conjoined Vs from close to the entrance of Wookey Hole. Figures approximately actual size.*

mentioned in Brears (1989). The style of the letters in the Kettlewell inscription closely resembles the marks in Figure 8. Cordingley also makes reference to instances where the letters IH have been marked on the walls of caves, amongst other places in the 1964 Series of Mongo Gill Hole.

The letters IH are the first two letters of the Greek form of Jesus, and IHC and IHS are common Christograms, i.e. monograms or combinations of letters that form an abbreviation for the name of Jesus Christ, traditionally used as a Christian symbol. Whether the two letters IH found here and in other places and caves do form a Christogram is not known, but the possibility cannot be ignored. A parallel can also be drawn with the Chi-Rho symbol, which only uses the first two letters of the name of Christ to form a monogram. In the case of the letters IH, the C or S has possibly been dispensed with because of the difficulty of inscribing a curve on rock.

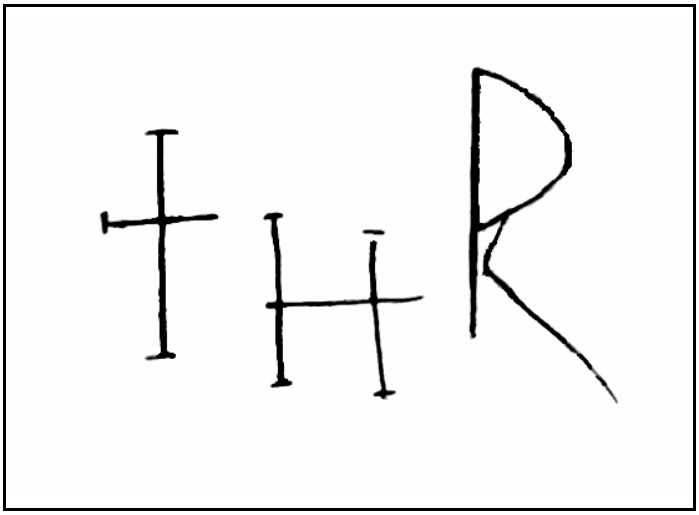


Figure 8. *Lettering from close to the entrance of Wookey Hole. Figures approximately actual size.*

In the course of his research, Easton has obtained a large number of photographs of 17th and 18th century candle marked ceilings, all from lower gentry houses, which are covered with symbols including both I and H

marked out boldly. Other letters which occur in these contexts, also made with a candle, are E, W, M and R, all of which have been found in caves. On ceilings they are arranged in a jumbled way amongst many other forms and are not present as initials to represent an occupier. Easton comments in this context, when considering the meaning of the letters when used together (Easton, *pers. comm*.), that despite the large amount of well-understood symbolism derived from pre-Reformation ciphers for the Virgin Mary used in an archaeological context for apotropaic reasons from the later 16th century to the 19th century, no evidence is found in domestic contexts for the continued use of Christograms in the same period. Easton does not feel that although the ⱶ and H are found together in more than one place, without the C, this makes a strong case for assuming these two letters are part of a Christogram. The meaning of such marks therefore remains open to further debate.

Figure 9. *Crossed mark in Wookey Hole.*
Photo: A. Atkinson.

More markings are found further into Wookey Hole. A large conjoined V, 11.5 cm high and 17.5 cm wide is located 16.2 m from the entrance on the right-hand wall, above the fourth step on the first flight of steps in the cave. This is easily visible without the need for any specialist lighting. At the junction of the two Vs is some graffiti, resembling the initials JN, which appears to bear no relation to the obviously apotropaic symbol that surrounds them. Immediately to the right is a very large letter M, 20 cm high and 11.5 cm wide. There is no other letter in conjunction with either the conjoined V or the M and both marks are believed to be apotropaic. Easton (*pers. comm*.) has various examples of the M sometimes alone and other times in conjunction with other letters such as AM and R, for instance on the outside of the priest's door on the south side of the church at Stoke-by-Nayland, Suffolk. There, the donor, John Longe, had his name carved, with an M immediately after the inscription. The original hinge dating to around 1500 partly covers this symbol, showing it to be original. The M is clearly seen in a way that does not relate to the carving of the donor's inscription. Easton observes that it is not surprising to see the Virgin's monogram used in this way, as a form of protection and blessing, during the pre-Reformation period and he further observes that on timbered buildings the instances of Ms tends to outnumber the use of the conjoined V, although the marks in Wookey Hole do not appear to follow that trend.

Further into the cave, at a point where a very noticeable cold draught is encountered, there is a crossed mark with a line joining the top and bottom corners to form a square (Figure 9).

Visitors to the cave now descend into the chamber containing the famous formation known as the Witch of Wookey Hole (Figure 10). When the stalagmite first started to bear this

name will be discussed in the following section of this paper. Beyond this chamber is a small aven, which the show-cave guides call The Witch's Chimney, although it is not known how long it has borne this name. It is here that the largest concentration of apotropaic marks so far discovered in any cave is located. It is also possible that more marks existed originally, as the lower section of the cave wall has been chiselled away on all sides to enable visitors to more easily pass this feature.

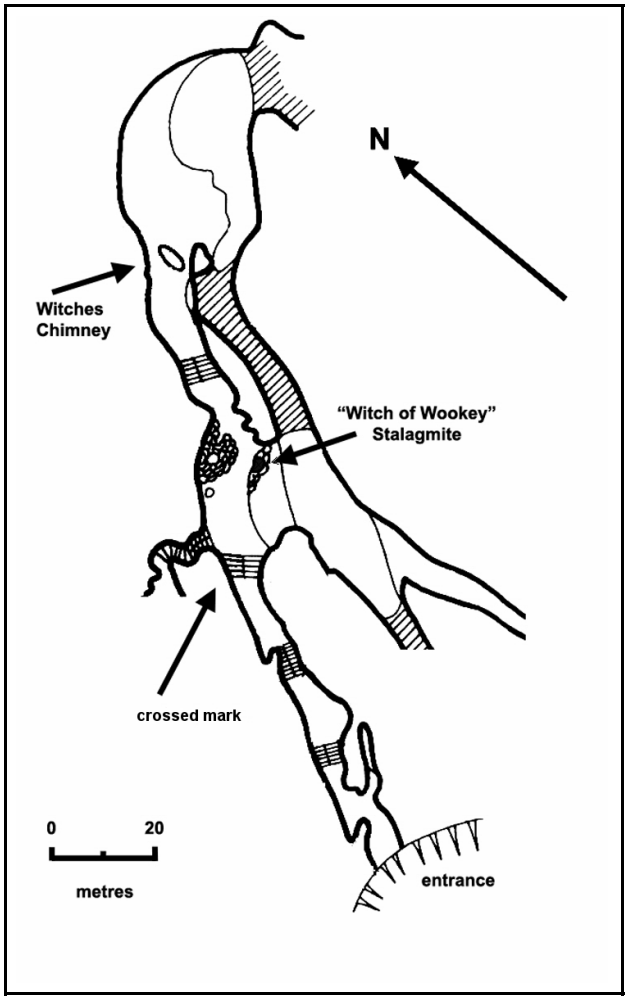


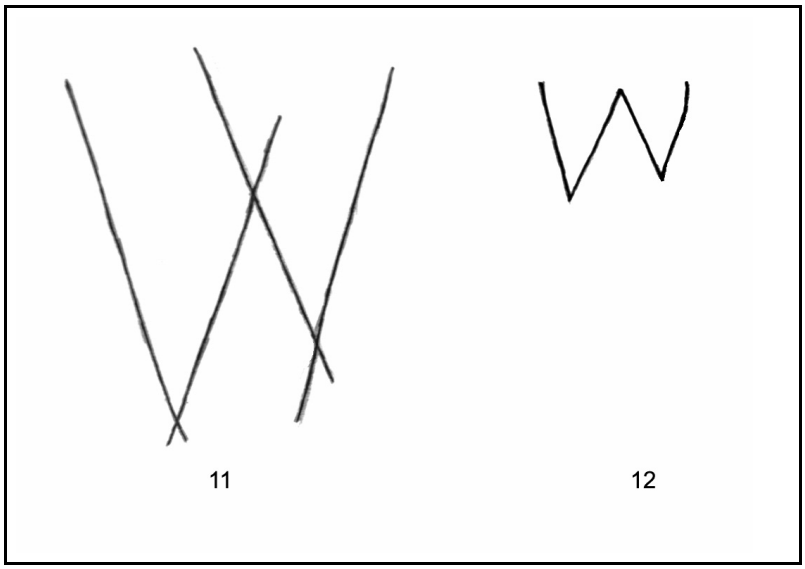
Figure 10. *Plan of Wookey Hole, first three Chambers.*
After Hanwell, 1970.

The Witch's Chimney contains numerous engravings and not all of these have, as yet, been recorded. The vast majority of the marks are small and very finely incised. These are best seen with the use of LED lights, lit from the side to cast a slight shadow. Finding and recording the marks is not an easy task. On some occasions, marks which had already been recorded have then proved remarkably elusive when looked for again, even only a matter of minutes later. The total number of marks in the Witch's Chimney has not yet been determined, although at least 40 marks are believed to have possible apotropaic significance. A representative sample of these will be described and illustrated here.

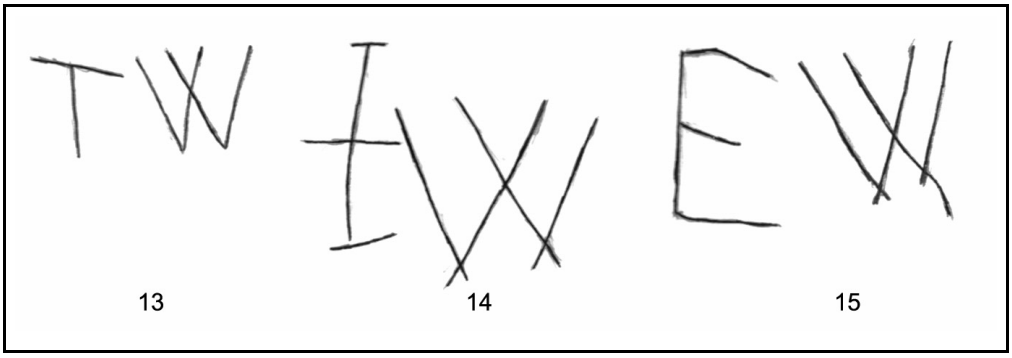
One of the most common marks to appear in the Witch's Chimney is the conjoined V, resembling a W. As stated above, this mark is believed to have a pre-Reformation origin. At least 16 examples have been recorded, sometimes as single marks, and sometimes in conjunction with other letters or symbols. A good example of this mark can be found immediately inside the entrance to the chimney at a height of 1.86 m above the show cave path (Figure 11). Another can be found on the right-hand side of the chimney on a deeply incised panel (Figure 12). This mark occurs several times in isolation but there are also instances of it being used in conjunction with other initials including the letters T (Figure 13), I (Figure 14) and E (Figure 15). It is noticeable that what appear to be 'ordinary' initials, that is, those that do not seem to have an apotropaic significance, are very much in the minority, although some examples do exist. One such example of what is believed to be simple graffiti are the letters AJ, clearly in conjunction with a date of 1706. It is worth noting that this

date inscription has an almost identical patina to the other marks described here, indicating that they are of a similar or greater antiquity.

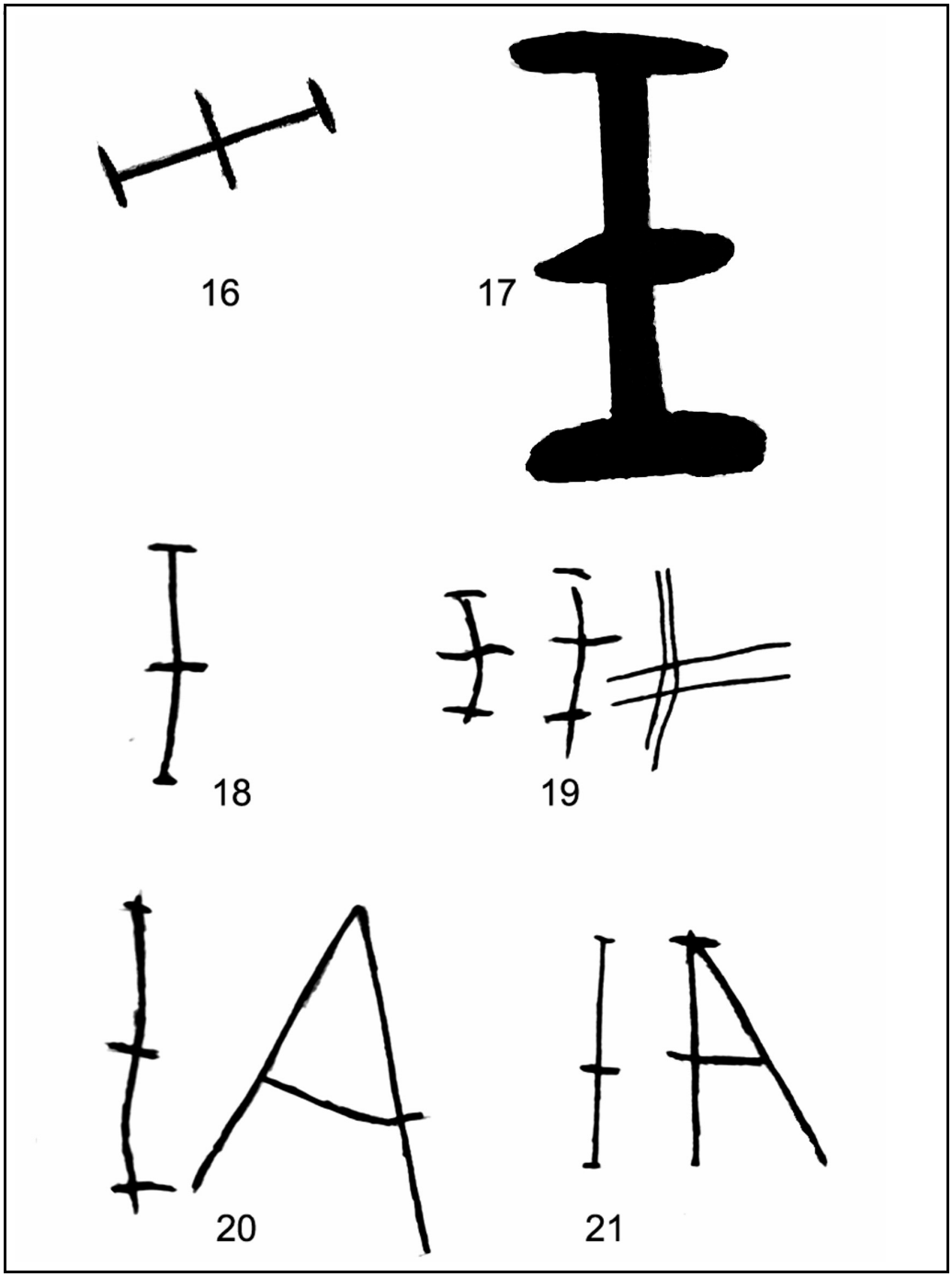
Another extremely common mark found in the Witch's Chimney is the ⸸, found in at least nine places, again sometimes on its own and sometimes clearly in conjunction with other letters. An example of the lone ⸸ can be found inscribed low down on the right-hand wall of the chimney (Figure 16). The mark is orientated almost horizontally. It appears to have been lightly chiselled into the rock and bears a striking resemblance to marks found by Easton in the course of his own research (Easton, *pers. comm*.). Another single ⸸ on the opposite wall of the chimney seems to have been formed by the rock having been ground smooth by some unidentified method (Figure 17). Another example of an ⸸ can be found on the right-hand side of the chimney 1.90 m above the path (Figure 18). In one place the ⸸ appears twice (Figure 19), possibly in conjunction with another set of finely incised marks which do not form any obvious letter. The authors believe it is possible that ⸸ used in this context may represent the first letter of the name Jesus.



Figures 11 & 12. *Conjoined Vs in the Witch's Chimney Wookey Hole. Figures approximately actual size.*



Figures 13, 14 & 15. *Conjoined Vs in conjunction with other initials in the Witch's Chimney, Wookey Hole. Figures approximately 75% actual size.*



Figures 16-21. ***I*** *symbols in the Witch's Chimney, Wookey Hole. Figures approximately actual size.*

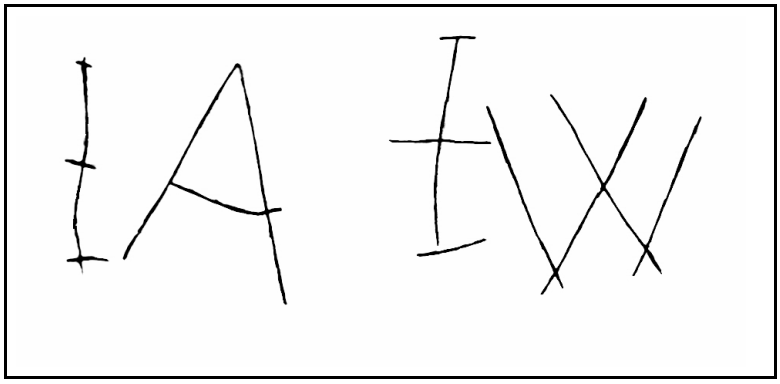
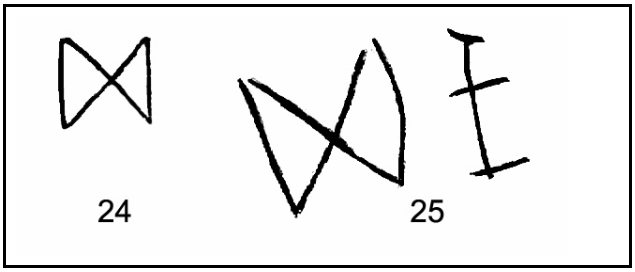


Figure 22. ***Ɨ*** *symbols possibly read together as a single panel. Witch's Chimney, Wookey Hole.*

The **Ɨ** also appears several times in obvious conjunction with other letters and symbols, namely **Ɨ**A (Figures 20 and 20), **Ɨ**W (Figure 14). It is possible, but by no means certain, that the **Ɨ**A and **Ɨ**W of Figures 20 and 14 are meant to be read together as a panel, namely **Ɨ**A**Ɨ**W (Figure 22), but due to the undulating shape of the rock it is impossible to be certain about this. The letters **Ɨ**A have also been recorded elsewhere in spelaeological literature (Cordingley, 2000). They have been noted in The First Miner's Workshop of James Hall's Over Engine Mine and also in Speedwell Cavern in Derbyshire. The letters A**Ɨ** have also been noted in the same contexts. It is possible that A represents Alpha, from the phrase 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' from the Book of Revelation and taken together with the **Ɨ** may form another possible Christogram.

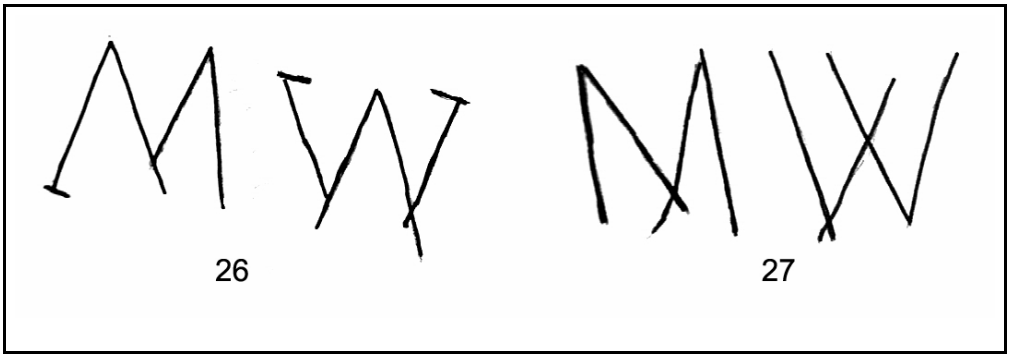
Figure 23. *Butterfly cross, Witch's Chimney, Wookey Hole.*
Photo: A. Atkinson

There are also a significant number of examples of the butterfly cross mark with dropped sides (Figures 23 and 24). In one instance this symbol appears in obvious conjunction with the ǂ mark (Figure 25). Easton (1999) states that this butterfly cross symbol has strong associations with averting evil. In a purely practical context this mark was used by carpenters to indicate a position for referencing plumb and level. However, Easton asserts that blacksmiths frequently used the butterfly cross on door latches and window stays to prevent evil entering through these openings, and it is of course always possible that these marks may have a double-meaning. The mark closely resembles the D or dagaz rune, which is associated with good luck and is believed to mean dawn, or new day. However, as Easton (1999) states, 'Perhaps some caution should be exercised about discussions of runic letters in these contexts. There may be some long memory which has allowed the D rune and others to filter through into the carpenters' grammar, but when letters are formed on wood without using curved lines, these do start to resemble parts of the runic alphabet without necessarily intending to.' The same is true of marks left on the walls of caves. These are more easily drawn in straight lines rather than in curves. In this paper the description butterfly cross mark will be used, instead of referring to the symbol as a dagaz rune, to make it clear that no runic connection is being asserted.



Figures 24 & 25. *Butterfly crosses in the Witch's Chimney, Wookey Hole. Figures approximately actual size.*

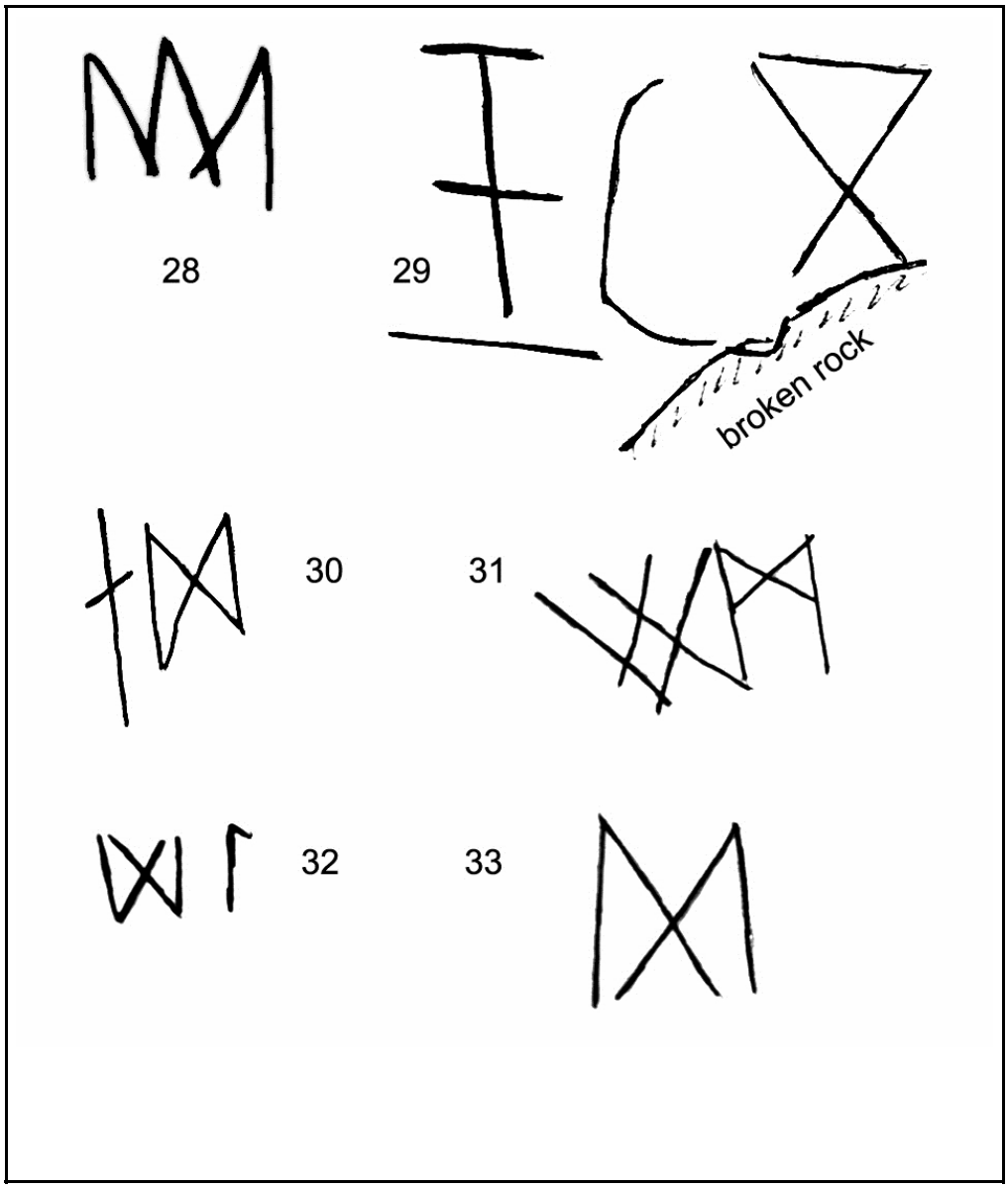
A significant fact about this symbol in a magical context is that it cannot be inverted, or turned back on its user, for evil purposes. The same is also true of the conjoined V, which, if inverted, simply gives an M, also a symbol of the Virgin Mary. There are two clear examples in the Witch's Chimney of the letters MW appearing together (Figures 26 and 27). Easton (1999) states that one such mark is clearly visible on the frame of the brick drying shed at the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum in Sussex. Easton comments that the M and W symbols are often seen next to each other and he believes that this juxtaposition demonstrates that they



Figures 26 & 27. *Paired Conjoined Vs and Ms. Witch's Chimney, Wookey Hole. Figures approximately 2.5 cm high.*

could be interchangeable but still have the same meaning, whichever way up they are placed (Easton, *pers. comm*.).

A mark resembling a double M can be found on the right-hand side of the chimney about 1.90 m above the path (Figure 28). Another unusual conjunction of marks can be found



Figures 28-33. *Unusual and/or undetermined marks and conjunctions of marks, Witch's Chimney, Wookey Hole. All figures approximately actual size.*

on the far side of the chimney 1.48 m above the path (Figure 29). Whoever inscribed this mark had trouble forming the bottom crossbar of the ǂ because of the way the rock slopes away, and what appears to be a vertical, rather than horizontal, butterfly cross mark has lost its lower section due to a break in the rock surface.

There are places in the Witch's Chimney where it is difficult to decide whether a mark is intended to be a butterfly cross or a conjoined V, but in one instance (Figure 31) the two symbols are used together and on this occasion the butterfly cross has the same elongated dropped sides sometimes found in timbered buildings such as Sexton's Cottage, Debenham (Easton, 1999, fig. 23). The butterfly cross also appears next to a simple cross (Figure 30), and with another mark which also has parallels on timber (Figure 32), namely a single line with a short line angled downwards and to the right of the top. An example of where it can be difficult to tell one form of mark from another can be found on the right-hand side of the chimney, about 2 m above floor level (Figure 33). This could be an M, or, more likely, it could be a butterfly cross.

It is impossible to reach any firm conclusion about the total number of marks in the Witch's Chimney, as new ones have been discovered each time the rock surface is examined, and extreme care has to be taken not to double-count marks. It seems very likely that many more marks originally existed before rock was removed from around the base of the chimney, as mentioned above. The process of fully recording the marks will continue, but is beyond the scope of this current paper.

Wookey Hole as a context for ritual protection marks

Wookey Hole is probably best known today for the large stalagmite known as the Witch of Wookey, which has for many years featured heavily on promotional material, leaflets, postcards and souvenirs. It is necessary to examine the story of the 'witch' in some detail to place the markings in a wider context and to explain their presence in the cave.

It is certainly the case that the eponymous stalagmite was not always associated with a witch. An early account of a visit to the cave by William of Worcester in about 1470 (Shaw, 1996) referred only to a figure of a woman, and made no reference to a witch. His account is not pejorative in any way, he merely describes '*... the figure of a woman ... clad and holding in her girdle a spinning distaff*.'

In 1577, William Harrison (1577) states '*The second Axe issueth out of Owky Hole ..*' in his contribution to Hollinshed's Chronicles, but he makes no reference to a witch or to any other stories associated with the cave.

Almost ten years later in 1586, Camden's Britannia, (published in English in 1610) states, "*Among these hils there is a cave or denne farre within the ground : wherein are to be seene certaine pits and rivelets, the place they call Ochie-hole, whereof the Inhabitants feine no fewer tales, nor devise lesse dotages, than the Italians did of their Sibyls Cave in the mountaine Apenninus. The name (no doubt) grew of Ogo, a British word, that betokeneth, a Den : even of the like den, the Isle Eubeara, was by such another name sometime called Ocha."*

It seems from this that numerous tales were already associated with the cave, but no further details of these are given. Shortly after, Drayton, in a long, topographical poem of 1612, (Drayton, 1612) also makes no reference to a witch.

In 1628 the first account appears that describes the now-famous formation as the Witch of Wookey. This is contained in a manuscript collection, now in the British Museum, by Bulstrode Whitelock, a lawyer. The manuscripts have not survived, but extracts have been quoted by various authors and the existence of this reference was first drawn to the attention of

the caving community by Bob Williams in a letter to the caving magazine, *Descent* in 1993 (Williams, 1993). Whitelock describes a visit to the cave in 1628 in company with a guide. He was shown, amongst other things, '*... the Porter, the Witch of Ochies Hole, stones resembling their names, ...*'. His visit was by candle-light and Whitelocke was clearly relieved when it was over.

In 1681, John Beaumont (1681) wrote of the River Axe, which resurges from the cave, "*… the cattle that feed in the pastures through which this river runs have been known to die suddenly sometimes after a flood. This is probably owing to the waters having been impregnated either naturally or accidentally, with lead ore …*"

During such deeply suspicious times, when women were often accused of bewitching both livestock and people causing them to sicken and die, phenomena such as the one reported by Beaumont could well have been taken as evidence of the association of the cave with the various forces of evil that were believed to play a large part in visiting trials and tribulations on the world.

In this context, it is worth noting that recorded instances of the supposed bewitchment of cattle were in fact much more common than reports of attacks on sheep, even in areas where sheep farming predominated. Davies (1999, 207-213) asserts that this can be explained by the practice of cows being a more integral part of the social space of a rural community. As a result, it would not be surprising to find the deaths of valuable animals like cattle being explained as the result of malevolent forces at work in the vicinity, as without Beaumont's knowledge of mines and the effects of lead poisoning, a supernatural reason for such misfortune would have come most readily to the minds of those involved.

The reference to the witch appears in the diary of a Dutch visitor, Lodewijck Huygens (Huygens, 1982), in 1652, where the cave is referred to as the '*hole of the Witch of Oky*' and is mentioned again in an account by Brome (1694) in which he referred to an '*old witch*' of alabaster. However, the witch has clearly not yet become ubiquitous as Marmaduke Rawdon's biography, published in 1863, referring to a visit in 1665, contains a description of '*Ouky hole, a vast cavern in the earth'*, but makes no mention of any formation called the Witch nor does he record any stories of that nature associated with the cave (R. Davies, 1863). Thirty three years later, Celia Fiennes gives an account of her visit in 1698, and refers to the stalagmite that '*The country people call the witch*' (Morris, 1949).

In 1727, Thomas Cox gives an extended account of the cave in his *Magna Britannia et Hibernia* (Cox, 1727), which describes the cave and its contents in some detail: *'It is parted into several Rooms, as a Kitchen, an Hall, a Dancing-room, a Cellar,&c. in which there are strange Resemblances of Creatures, and Things artificial in the natural Rock; as of a Man's Head, a Tomb-stone, a Dog ; the Rock in which they are incorporated, Part of it glistering like Silver, and Part-like Diamonds, and both appearing very pleasant to the Eye ; a Bell, a Guile-fat, an hollow Cistern, always full of Water, but never running over, tho' receiving every Moment fresh Supplies by the Drops which trickle from the Top of the Rock ; the Statue of a Woman, which they call the Old Witch, of a white Stone, like Albaster ;'*

From the above, it will be seen that by the first quarter of the 18th century there was a strong association between the cave of Wookey Hole and the story of the witch. This has continued to the present day.

The Witch of Wookey Hole in 18th and 19th century poetry

In the middle of the 18th century, Wookey Hole and the story of the witch started to appear in poetry. In 1748 a poem by Henry Harrington (Cary, 1924) recounts in detail the tale

of the Witch of Wookey who was supposedly turned to stone by a '*lernede wight*' from Glaston(bury) by the following means:

He chaunted out his godlie booke
He crost the water, blest the booke
  Then – Pater Noster done –
The ghastly hag he sprinkled o'er,
When lo! where stood a hag before,
  Now stood a ghastly stone.

This passage appears to describe an exorcism ritual whereby extracts from what is presumed to be the Bible were read out, the sign of a cross was made over water, the book was then blessed and, after reading out the Pater noster, better known now as the Lord's Prayer, the witch was sprinkled, presumably with what was now holy water, and she was turned to stone. The rites used here appear to be based on the rites of exorcism set out in The Ritual Romanum, a service manual for priests containing the only formal exorcism rite sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, first written in 1614. The Reformed Church of England had no specific rites of its own and its exorcism rituals were heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic tradition.

The remainder of Harrington's poem contains a lament for the absence of eligible men in the area, seemingly as a result of the witch's curse whereby '*...men are wondrous scant* …', so it appears that, at least so far as Harrington was concerned, the 'witch' had the last laugh.

At the beginning of the 19th century, two further poems were published that are relevant to the development of the story of the witch and the association of the cave with the forces of evil. The first, by Anna Sawyer, is entitled *The Witch of Wokey Hole* and is dated 1801 (Cary, 1924) The poem follows a common format and purports to tell a familiar 'ancient' story, said to be well known in the area:

From Wokey Hole the truant waters flow,
The Witch of Wokey all the neighbours know;
The wrinkled hag, as ancient stories tell,
By potent magic for'd her sparry cell;
And still the rustics her untensils name,
And still they show the alabaster Dame:
Her chair, where, mutt'ring backward pray'rs she sate,
Her stone gridiron, and her crony cat.

The remainder of the poem described the exit of *lucid streamlets* from the cave and made no further mention of the witch. The reference here to the witch '*mutt'ring backward pray'rs'* represents a common belief that witches would misappropriate Christian prayers and turn them into curses by reciting them backwards. Merrifield (1987 p147), gives an example of a written curse, with the name of the person on whom the curse was laid being written backwards. The 1810 poem by James Jennings will be considered in more detail in the following section.

It seems reasonable to describe these poems, and the one by Jennings, as folk-tales. Davies (1999) divides folk-tales into two broad categories: folk narratives, which perhaps deal with actual beliefs, although the stories themselves may be pure invention, and folk legends, which are accounts of events that are believed, by those recounting them, to have actually occurred. Some folk legends concerning witches contain sufficient personal information for the

individuals involved to be traced in parish records of the time (Davies, 1999, 168): however, this is clearly not the case for the folk-tale of the Witch of Wookey.

Harrington refers to the origin of the tale 'In aunciente days' and says 'tradition shows', going on to state that he heard the fearful tale from 'Sue, and Roger of the Vale, ..' The story of the witch therefore comes into the sub-category of folk narrative, as it demonstrates a belief in the embodiment of an abstract concept of evil in the stalagmite, thought originally to represent the petrified form of an old woman, which later became strongly associated with the tale of a witch and by 1628 had become known as the Witch of Wookey Hole.

"Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!"

James Jennings, the author of a poem containing the above words, was a friend of the poet Robert Southey and wrote poetry himself, although Southey did not reciprocate Jennings's admiration of his work. Jennings published a series of essays under the title of the 'Speculator' in a weekly newspaper, and several of his poems appeared in other periodicals. Jennings also wrote a major work in four parts entitled *The Dialect of the West of England Particularly Somersetshire, with a glossary of words now in use there; also with poems and other pieces exemplifying the dialect* (Jennings, 1825). In addition, Jennings wrote a smaller volume entitled *Poems, consisting of the Mysteries of Mendip, the Magic Ball, Sonnets, Retrospective Wanderings, and other pieces* (Jennings, 1810). An extract from the poem was quoted by Balch (1947) who stated that Jennings was 'reciting the custom of his day'. However, Balch included the extract without giving any details of the context, and therefore a more detailed treatment of the relevant parts of the poem will be given here.

In his preface Jennings states: '*It is presumed that no apology is necessary for publishing the Poems on Popular Superstitions: to remove these is, no doubt, Herculean labour; but it is the duty of everyone to contribute his mite.*' A list of contents follows the preface, and then, immediately prior to the poem now under discussion, namely *The Mysteries of Mendip; or, the Lost Lady*, the book contains the following statement:

> 'A SUPERSITITION is well known in the county of Somerset, I know not whether it be general throughout our island, that whenever any person is supposed to *come again*, after death, to *trouble* the house in which he resided during his life-time, the only effectual way to *lay* the spirit, is to assemble some *cunning* men, who will *conjure* it away into some cavern or river, for *seven* years, during which period, the house will remain free from its intrusion: at the end of this time, it returns again, and again it must be *conjured* away another *seven* years: at the end of this period, it must be *conjured* away into the RED SEA; which completely cures the troublesome house, the spirit never returning afterwards. – Upon this specimen of credulity is the following poem founded.'

The capitals and italics used above replicate those in the original. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives two definitions of the word credulity: 1. Belief, faith, credence, readiness to believe – 1794 and 2. Readiness to believe on weak or insufficient grounds 1547. It seems likely that Jennings himself may have been using the word in the latter context, as although he clearly took an interest in such beliefs, many of which he may well have encountered in his research into the Somerset dialect, that does not mean he held the same beliefs.

The reference to *'cunning men'* deserves some explanation as the term is not widely known now. Owen Davies (2003), states that '… two hundred years ago the majority of the

population would have known at least one cunning-man or cunning-woman.' Davies comments that 'Cunning-folk was just one of several terms used in England to describe multi-faceted practitioners of magic who healed the sick and the bewitched, who told fortunes, identified thieves, induced love, and much else besides.' As part of his research into the Somerset dialect, Jennings would almost certainly have come into contact with cunning-folk. It is also worth noting that in Somerset 'conjurer' and 'wizard' were common terms to describe male cunning-folk (Davies, *pers. comm*.).

The poem of the Lost Lady tells the tragic tale of the lovely Lady Blanche, beloved daughter of Sir Archibald of Hospitality Hall. Lady Blanche had two suitors, Sir Arthur, who is described as 'gentle, though manly – not proud', and the 'selfish', 'proud' and 'austere' Sir Oliver. Lady Blanche is set upon by a 'ruffian' and drowned, with a stone tied to her girdle and sunk 'in the wave'. When his daughter does not return home, her father instigates various searches, all of which prove fruitless and the first part of the poem ends with Sir Archibald appealing to God to restore his daughter to him, and with Sir Arthur consumed by despair.

With Lady Blanche still missing, her maid, and then various other members of Sir Archibald's household, were terrified by strange noises in Lady Blanche's room, and after several days the household became convinced that the mansion was being haunted by the spirit of Lady Blanche, unable to find rest while her body lay unburied. Eventually it was decided to send out the butler to consult 'the old *Wight*, who liv'd far, far away, How to lay the lorn Spirit which troubled the house, And to give it eternal repose!'

The butler, John, finally reached the ruined abbey where the old Wight lived and was admitted by his hag of a wife. The following verses describe the encounter (the layout and use of italics follow those in the original):

> His errand he told him. – The old *Wight* got up.
> John laid all his gifts on the ground.
> The bell the *Wight* pull'd, and then open'd a book,
> Over which he por'd long, and then tore out a leaf;
> "Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!
>
> "Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!"
> he exclaimed,
> "Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!"
> And yet o'er the book he stood pouring; and yet
> As the *Butler* awaited his answer, he cried,
> "Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!"
>
> No more could the *Butler* obtain : he still cried,
> "Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!"
> Then looking around, with a horrible grin,
> O'er the gold and the presents, he cried, "Get
> Thee gone !
> "Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!"

And so the second part of the poem ends. In the third part, the butler makes his way back to Sir Archibald's mansion with the sinister refrain "Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!" still ringing in his ears. He tells his tale, but no one knows what the words mean and

so an '*old Dame*' who lives in a cottage a short distance away is consulted to see if she can explain the words.

The *old Dame*, much knowing of legends the lore
  Look'd and smil'd at their ignorance all.
"Come listen!" she cries, "and full soon you
  shall learn
The meaning conceal'd in those dark-sounding
  Words,
Wookey-Hole, Cheddar-Cliffs, the Red Sea!"

"*To lay the lorn* SPIRIT, *you o'er it must pray,*
And command it, at length, to be gone far away,
  And, in WOOKEY's *deep* HOLE,
  To be under control
For the space of SEVEN YEARS *and a* DAY.

"*If then it return, you must pray and command,*
    By midnight,
    By moonlight,
    By Death's ebon wand,
That to CHEDDAR CLIFFS *now, it departeth in peace,*
And another SEVEN YEARS *its sore troubling will*
    Cease.

    "If it return still,
    As, I warn you, it will,
    To the RED Sea for ever
    Command it, and never,
    Or noise more or sound
    In the House shall be found."

However, before anyone has chance to act on the old woman's words, a 'holy *Monk'* arrives, and solves the mystery of Lady Blanche's murder by telling her father that his daughter has in fact been murdered by Sir Oliver who, dying on a battlefield, had confessed his sins to the monk. Armed with this information, Sir Archibald is able to find the body of his daughter, and Sir Arthur returns from the wars just in time to see her body recovered. He is then able to attend the funeral of his beloved Blanche. It appears that the discovery of her body, followed by a Christian burial, was enough to lay her ghost to rest, and so there was no need to make use of the information bought with gold from the 'old Wight', which was clarified for Blanche's grieving father by the 'old Dame'.

The poem appears to provide a vehicle for Jennings to record, in an imaginary setting, a superstition which he believed to be well known in Somerset. For our purposes, Jennings's poem provides a link between Wookey Hole and the caves in the cliffs of Cheddar Gorge, all sites in which ritual protection marks have been found. The poem is another folk-narrative that describes a belief in the fact that malevolent spirits can be banished from the personal space of the nearby populace into either a cavern - here the cave of Wookey – or a river, for a certain

period, namely seven years. When the spirit returns at the end of the seven years it is then banished again to the Red Sea.

In the poem, the old woman, presumably a cunning-woman, gives an explanation of the mysterious words repeated over and over again by the old Wight, by reciting a form of charm giving instructions for the laying to rest of troublesome spirits.

The expectation embodied in the poem appears to have been that the spirit or spirits would return at the end of the first seven year period, to trouble their former locality, thus necessitating further expulsion. It is here that Cheddar enters the picture as, according to the old woman, the spirits are next sent to the cliffs there. Once in Cheddar cliffs, the old woman's words appear to indicate that the spirit would be rendered harmless for a further seven years. Whilst the number seven has a common magical significance, the addition of an extra day in the old woman's recitation is believed to be simply poetic licence on the part of Jennings to provide a rhyme for the words 'pray' and 'away', which appear at the end of the first two lines of the verse. The poem presumes that at the end of the second period of seven years the spirit will once again be free to emerge from the cave. When that happens, it can be dealt with once and for all by banishment to the Red Sea. So, when the spirit is evicted a final time from the neighbourhood after its sojourns in Wookey Hole and Long Hole, the verse embodies the belief that once the spirit has reached the Red Sea it would then be unable to leave, presumably because of the magical or ritual significance of the number three and at that point, the locality from which the spirit had been expelled would be troubled no more.

It seems likely that the reference to Wookey Hole in this context arose because of the association of the cave with a witch for the previous 120 years. So far as the Cheddar cliffs are concerned, they would also have been well known to anyone familiar with Somerset and, at the time Jennings was writing, with less vegetation in the Cheddar Gorge, and the absence of the buildings which now surround the present show-cave complex of Gough's Cave, the entrance to Long Hole in particular would have dominated the lower area of the cliffs even more than it does today. The inclusion in the poem of the imposing Cheddar cliffs with their numerous cave entrances is therefore no surprise and it is possible that the local inhabitants of Cheddar may have thought of Long Hole and the other caves in the cliffs as being the abode of harmful spirits. This is a not uncommon view of caves at various points in history.

The more puzzling inclusion in the poem is the reference to the Red Sea. Davies (2007) cites various examples of this practice, which indicates that the belief was not confined to Somerset but was indeed more widespread. One example given is from Shropshire recorded in a book of folklore published in 1883 and the earliest reference Davies has found to this tradition is in a deposition taken in 1650 from a servant in an Essex alehouse who had complained of being haunted by the ghost of her mistress (Davies, 2007, 76). The belief also appears in a humorous play by Joseph Addison, which was first performed in 1715. Davies states, "The enduring tradition of Red Sea ghost-laying is evident from several references in the folklore record of the early twentieth century. A Wiltshire folklorist, writing in 1901, recorded a local legend of how a ghost begged a parson not to lay it in the Red Sea, while in Somerset the ghost of a wicked old man of West Harptree was first laid for a period of seven years by the local vicar, but when the allotted time expired he turned up again to annoy the locals. This time the vicar cast it into the Red Sea.'

There appear to be two possible explanations for this practice. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that the Red Sea was associated with the drowning of Pharaoh's army in pursuit of Moses and his followers, and so might have been seen as a place where good triumphed over evil and thus was an appropriate place for the containment of troublesome spirits.

However, a second explanation for the term needs to be considered. It is possible that the reference to the Red Sea in this context derives from the Hebrew myths that associate Lilith, Adam's first wife, with the Red Sea, a region said to have abounded with demons, which Lilith then added to with her own progeny. Graves and Patai (1963) states that Lilith's flight to the Red Sea after her dispute with Adam recalls the ancient Hebrew view that water attracts demons. The extent to which such a myth might have been present in the popular consciousness of the time is open to conjecture, particularly in the case of the first known reference, which dates to 1650, but connection with the folklore surrounding Lilith cannot be discounted. A possible influence in this context on Jennings' work was Matthew Lewis's novel *The Monk*, which appeared in 1796, 14 years before Jennings published the Mysteries of Mendip, and includes reference to the laying of a ghost in the Red Sea.

To what extent, if any, the poem can be taken as evidence of actual protective practices in the area at or about that time is unknown, although Balch (1937) stated that Jennings was reciting the 'custom of his day' and Jennings himself asserted that the superstition was well known in Somerset and, as has been seen, Jennings had clearly deeply immersed himself in the life of Somerset people as part of his researches. The other instances of this belief referred to above also include one from the same area of Somerset. However, the question that still remains to be answered in this context is whether a case can be made for the presence of Jewish folklore in Somerset at the beginning of the 18th century.

The following hypothesis is offered in an attempt to make this connection, with particular reference to the West Country. In 1656, Oliver Cromwell formally overturned Edward I's Edict of Expulsion and, almost certainly for commercial reasons, encouraged the return of the Jews to this country. A year later, the first Jewish cemetery in post-expulsion England was opened in London, at Mile End (Gent, 2010), and in the second half of the 18th century provincial Jewish congregations began to establish their own cemeteries. By 1800 there were some 20 Jewish cemeteries outside London, including one in Bath. In Bristol, the first synagogue was established in 1756 and four years later in 1759, Felix Farley's Journal, a local newspaper, refers to a '… Jews' Burying Ground' in the city. A second cemetery was founded in Bristol in 1811 (Hillaby and Sermon, 2004).

Rabbi Dr. Bernard Susser (Gent, 2010) provides evidence for a wave of Jewish immigrants who arrived in the south west between 1730 and the end of the 18th century. They began to settle in Devon by 1730, and continued to arrive for the next 70 to 80 years. According to Susser, they mainly came from Germany, either directly, or through Amsterdam and he states that 'their education was limited to a study of Hebrew and post-Biblical works, the Talmud in particular.' The Jewish immigrants seemed to have made a concerted effort to integrate themselves into the lives of the communities in which they settled, and by 1880, the Jewish communities of Penzance, Falmouth and Exeter had been 'assimilated out of existence' (Gent, 2010).

With this in mind, it is worth looking in more detail at Jennings' description of the old man who was consulted by Sir Archibald's butler in his question for information on how to lay a ghost. It seems possible that Jennings was influenced by Harrington's earlier poem, as Harrington's 'lernede wight' came from Glaston(bury), which of course had a ruined Abbey. Perhaps in an echo of this, Jennings described his 'old Wight' as living in a ruined Abbey.

The word 'wight' is defined in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as '1. A living being; a creature – 1587. b. orig. and chiefly with (good or bad) epithet, applied to supernatural, preternatural or unearthly beings. 2. A human being, man or woman, person. Now *arch*. or *dial*. (often implying contempt or commiseration). It seems that whilst Harrington is using the word in a non-pejorative sense, Jennings' meaning is quite different.

The first two verses of the second part of his poem describe the character as follows (again retaining the author's own emphasis):

Afar from the haunts and hum of the world,
In a ruin'd old *Abbey* obscure,
Lives a merciless MISER, whose worn, tatter'd coat,
Through many a winter has hung on his back;
Through the holes you may see his dark skin.

His eyes are all hollow, his cheeks are dark sunk,
And furrow'd adown to his beard.
When he ventures abroad all suspicion he looks;
Sometimes fast he hurries – then mopingly slow;
In his hand he oft carries a book.

The references to the old man as a miser with dark skin and ragged clothing possibly stem from common stereotypes of Jews, as typified by both Shakespeare and Marlowe, amongst others. This is reinforced by a line in the poem, when describing how his 'old hag' of a wife provides fresh food for him, 'but his favourite dish is the heart' possibly echoing mistaken beliefs that the Jews engaged in cannibalistic practices, often involving children.

The story of Lilith was present in Jewish folklore, and there was a wave of Jewish immigration into the south-west in the 80 years before Jennings wrote his poem. The poem itself contains a character which could possibly have been based on a Jewish stereotype. In addition, Jennings had a deep involvement with ordinary country-folk in Somerset through his dialect research. This hypothetical origin of the practise of banishing malevolent spirits to the Red Sea is therefore offered for consideration alongside a connection with the drowning of Pharaoh's army.

CONCLUSIONS

Comparison with symbols found elsewhere, in particular with those in timbered buildings, demonstrates that the scribed marks found in various Mendip caves are ritual protection marks. The similarities are too numerous to allow any other conclusion to be reached. These marks have now been found in Goatchurch Cavern, Long Hole, Great Oone's Hole and in Wookey Hole, with by far the greatest number appearing in the latter, a cave that has been associated with stories of a witch since at least 1628. The marks provide a very direct, physical link between the prevalence of witch belief in the area and attempts made to obtain some measure of protection from malevolent spirits.

The noticeable preponderance of the marks identified by Easton as a conjoined V also found in conjunction with other letters such as the **I** appears to indicate that marks which have often been interpreted as nothing more than graffiti may in fact be protective in origin. This view is lent weight by observations on similar marks elsewhere in spelaeological literature, although these have, until now, been thought of as nothing more than simple graffiti, left behind by people whose initials the letters were believed to represent. In particular the letters **I**H, A**I** and **I**A are relevant to this theory. The belief that these letters are no more than initials of people's names is one that the current authors believe should be challenged and reappraised in the light of the finds under the Mendip Hills in Somerset.

The poems by Harrington, Sawyer and Jennings, and the additional remarks made by Jennings in his volume of poetry, provide evidence of the strength of the witch tradition and the belief in evil spirits in the Mendip area of Somerset from the mid 18th century to the early part of the 19th century. In contrast, in other parts of the country, at the same time, there are only a few known examples of ballads with similar subject material. Davies (1999) remarks on the general paucity of witch-related songs in the oral and printed traditions of the country as a whole for this period. Somerset, therefore, appears as unusual in this context. It is asserted that these poems do represent genuine folk tales, embodying, albeit in poetic form, the beliefs of country folk at the time they were written. An attempt has also been made to provide an argument for the presence in a 19th century folk narrative of elements of Jewish folklore, and the description of the old miser who was consulted, presumably for his arcane knowledge, might possibly embody a typical Jewish stereotype. However, the absence of any proven transference of belief from Judaism to 18th and 19th century English folk tradition makes the connection with the Lilith myth nothing more than speculation on the part of the authors, offered as a possible alternative to the Biblical explanation.

In addition, while it appears that belief in the existence of supernatural evil was declining elsewhere in the country (Davies, 1999) by the time that Jennings wrote his poem, this decline is not reflected in the traditions of the Mendip Hills and the surrounding area. One reason for the persistence of the belief in the activities of evil spirits and witches in this area could well have been lent additional weight by the seemingly inexplicable cattle deaths mentioned by Beaumont. Davies (1999) notes that, 'Within the context of nineteenth – and early – twentieth century rural society, a series of inexplicable misfortunes in relation to personal health or livestock could still turn sceptics into witch-believers.'

This area of Somerset, in particular the prominent limestone gorges of Ebbor, Cheddar and Burrington Combe are also rich in caves, and ritual protection marks have been found in caves in all three sites, namely Wookey Hole in Ebbor Gorge, Long Hole and Great Oone's Hole in Cheddar Gorge and Goatchurch Cavern in Burrington Combe. This fits with the superstition, as recorded by Jennings in the opening remarks of his volume of poetry that local belief held that unwelcome spirits could be banished into caves or rivers. In this context it is worth noting that the cave of Wookey fulfils both criteria in that it is a cavern from which a river issues, and the water can be seen underground at several points on a visit to its depths.

Jennings and his fellow poets are not the only evidence of the actions taken locally to ward off spirits and other evil. Balch (1932) quotes instances of attempts being made locally to ward off evil by various means, common at the time, and indeed still common today in parts of Europe, including sticking pins into animals' hearts and also placing pins in niches near the entrance to Wookey Hole. Merrifield (1987, 54) demonstrates that the threshold was sometimes selected as the appropriate place for a ritual deposit, 'foreshadowing a common practice of later times, when special attention was given to the protection of entrances by various ritual devices.' The placing of pins in 'witch-bottles' (Merrifield, 1987, 163), a form of sympathetic magic, was also common in Somerset (Davies, 1999, 58). The entrance to a cave represents a very significant threshold and a panel of ritual protection marks has been identified just inside the entrance to Wookey Hole.

Pins were also found in Long Hole during excavations in 1977 (Mullan, 2007). The excavation log for the archaeological dig notes that 'the edge of the lower compact layer was found and immediately post Pleistocene objects began to be found including Victorian (?) Pins, pot sherds, animal and human bones but by this time it was 1600 hrs and work had started at 10.00 and a lunch break only 0.5 hr. The area of bones was covered with scree and the party left.' E. K. Tratman lists the relevant finds as 'Several pins temporarily held by RH (Two were

discarded, perhaps foolishly, by EKT.'[2] This excavation was possibly located some 60 – 80 m from the entrance. The apotropaic mark illustrated at Figure 1 is located 24 m from the entrance, but it is not known whether the 1977 excavators took their measurements from the same point, as the entrance to Long Hole is both wide and deep, so the placement of the pins in relation to the conjoined V cannot be established with any certainty. The possible significance of the pins in this context was clearly unknown to the excavators, but their presence is worth noting as the possibility that this was a ritual deposit cannot be ruled out.

In a largely illiterate populace, the written word was both important and magical (Merrifield, 1987, 137), so it is not surprising that writing plays an important part in magical practices. It is possible that the practise of inscribing a mark or a symbol on a surface such as a lintel or doorway, or the wall of a cave, was a way in which illiterate people could participate in a magical act. It is also possible that in some cases people may have used their own initial or initials, coupled them with a mark which had known protective significance, and incorporated them into a ritual.

The presence of the butterfly-shaped cross symbols in caves appears to lay to rest any argument that such marks only have a purely practical application, for instance for use solely as carpenter's or mason's marks. In a cave, their only function would appear to be in a magical or ritual context and they cannot be said to serve any more mundane purpose. The butterfly cross marks are, in general, smaller and more finely incised into the rock than other marks, but the reason for this is not known. Many of the other marks are, with a few notable exceptions, generally between 2 – 2.5 cm high.

What is not known is how many of the marks were made by a single person, or whether these represent the efforts of many people over a long period of time. However, the difference in style between several of the marks does not indicate a common origin. Nor do we know whether the making of the marks was accompanied by any other form of ritual, such as spoken words, or whether they formed part of any formal exorcism rite. They could represent the efforts of cunning-folk or they could have been made by ordinary people who were importing the same marks they used in their homes into the setting of a cave. Neither possibility is mutually exclusive. The other area in which only supposition can be applied is the question of when the marks were made. The identification of the stalagmite in the cave with a witch by 1628 falls within the period of witch-related activity in the country and there is no reason why some of these marks could not have been made in the same period, as their patina is commensurate with inscriptions of a similar age in other caves. However, there is no means of securely dating any of the markings as there is no calcite covering the engravings from which a date could be obtained.

The authors are of the opinion that they have only started to scratch the surface of the instance of such markings in both caves and mines, and they have seen photographs of conjoined Vs in other underground sites that they intend to visit as part of future research.

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[2] The question mark after the word Victorian appears in the original dig notes. EKT is Edgar Kingsley Tratman and RH is Richard Harrison.

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