

TWO WITCH-BOTTLES FROM SUFFOLK

By RALPH MERRIFIELD, B.A., F.S.A., F.M.A.

and NORMAN SMEDLEY, M.A., F.S.A., F.M.A.

During excavations for the foundations of the Ipswich Civic College buildings in the summer of 1958, a stoneware bottle (Plate XVIa) was unearthed from beneath the floor level of a house near the corner of Pottery Street and Arthur Street. The houses had been razed some years ago, before World War II, and it was impossible to ascertain either the exact street number (possibly 45 or 47 Pottery Street), or the age of the house in question, but it had in any case probably been demolished and rebuilt in the 19th century.

A portion of the side of the bottle had been broken away, and was never recovered, but the contents were so cemented together due to corrosion that it is probable that nothing was lost. An interesting feature was the fact that the neck was still firmly plugged. Even a superficial examination made it clear that the bottle had been used as a 'witch-bottle'.

The bottle itself was of uncommon type, being of the same form as the 'Bellarmine' often used for this purpose, but bearing on the neck, in place of the usual mask, an impressed pattern of three horse-shoes, a device repeated on the shoulder. It represents the final phase of the degeneration of the 'Bellarmine', and may be compared with the specimen illustrated by M. R. Holmes¹ in which the mask and medallion have become mere triangles. It can be attributed to the last quarter of the 17th century, and was probably made only a few years before 1700. This was a period when the Fulham factory was in full swing, and John Dwight had secured an agreement with the Glass-Sellers' Company in 1676 to supply them with all the stoneware they needed, instead of their obtaining it from the Germans.² It is therefore tempting to regard this bottle as of English origin. Three horseshoes suggest the name of a tavern, and a design to order would be perhaps more likely from the Fulham factory than from a German manufacturer. The bottle has, however, been examined by Mr. F. S. Thomas, the well-known collector of German stoneware, who states that it has several features, including a trace of the spiral wire-mark on the base, that are usually regarded as characteristic of the German bottles. Recognisable products of Dwight's factory are in fact.

¹ M. R. Holmes, *Antiquaries Journal*, xxxi (1950), Pl. XXVc.

² W. B. Honey, *English Pottery and Porcelain* (1949), pp. 54-55.

unaccountably rare, even in London, whereas supposedly German bottles dating from the period of his monopoly are very common indeed.

The contents of the witch-bottle (Plate XVI*b*) presented many interesting and unusual features, and will be described in detail below. It is however possible that some of the objects included might have been duplicated in the earlier Suffolk finds had the circumstances of these provided an opportunity for examination at an early stage. The contents were firmly secured by rust in the upper part of the bottle, a circumstance which suggests that it was deposited upside-down, as were similar witch-bottles from Stradbroke and Norwich.³ The neck was stoppered with a plug of mud or clay only, like another example found in the Thames in London.⁴ In the neck, between the stopper and the main mass of corroded contents, were a number of strips of wood, which evidently went in last.

The contents were dissected by Mr. W. Rector, technician at Guildhall Museum, and were found to include a variety of objects, some of which are common to most 17th century witch-bottles, while others have not hitherto been recorded, although they conform generally with the specification given by Cotton Mather in 1691 for the contents of a witch-bottle—' . . . such Instruments . . . as carry a shew of Torture with them.'⁵

The objects found in this bottle (Plate XVII*a*) and known in others were the following:—a piece of felt (in several fragments but originally no doubt heart-shaped as in other instances) in which six or seven brass pins were stuck: some human hair and more than forty iron nails of various sizes—the exact number being impossible to estimate, as many are very fragmentary. No traces were found of human nail-parings, another common ingredient of this popular counter-charm against witchcraft.

Objects not hitherto recorded in a witch-bottle included a two-pronged iron fork (apparently an ordinary table-fork): more than forty small fragments of glass: twenty-four brass studs with convex mushroom-like heads (possibly pins for upholstery): and fragments of several flat wooden spills, pointed at the ends, of the type used for making sulphur matches for use with the tinder-box. It is again impossible to be certain of the exact number of the last, but there are eight pointed ends, suggesting that there were four, if they were sharpened at both ends.

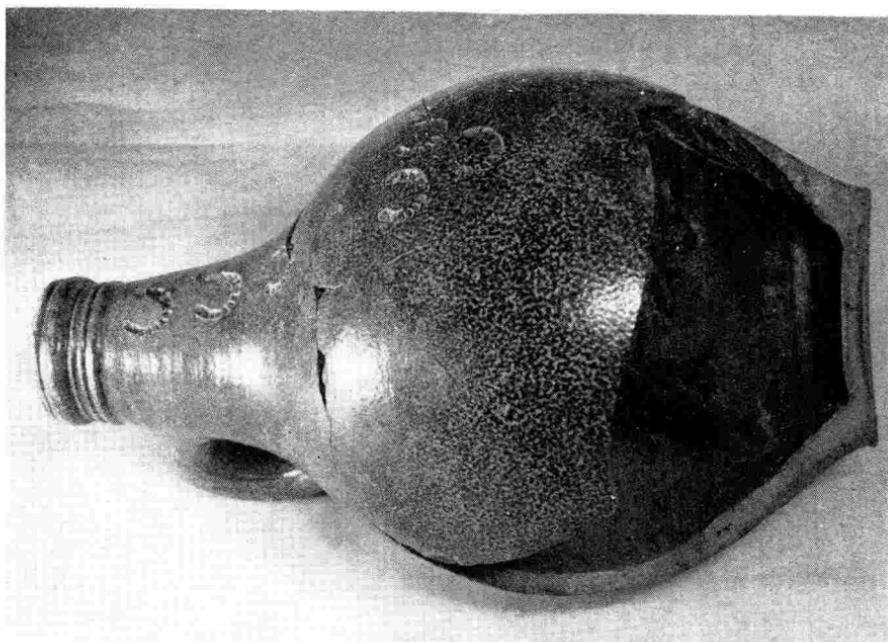
Five samples of the contents were sent to Dr. A. E. Werner of the British Museum Research Laboratory, who very kindly under-

³ R. Merrifield, *Guildhall Miscellany*, No. 3 (1954), p. 11.

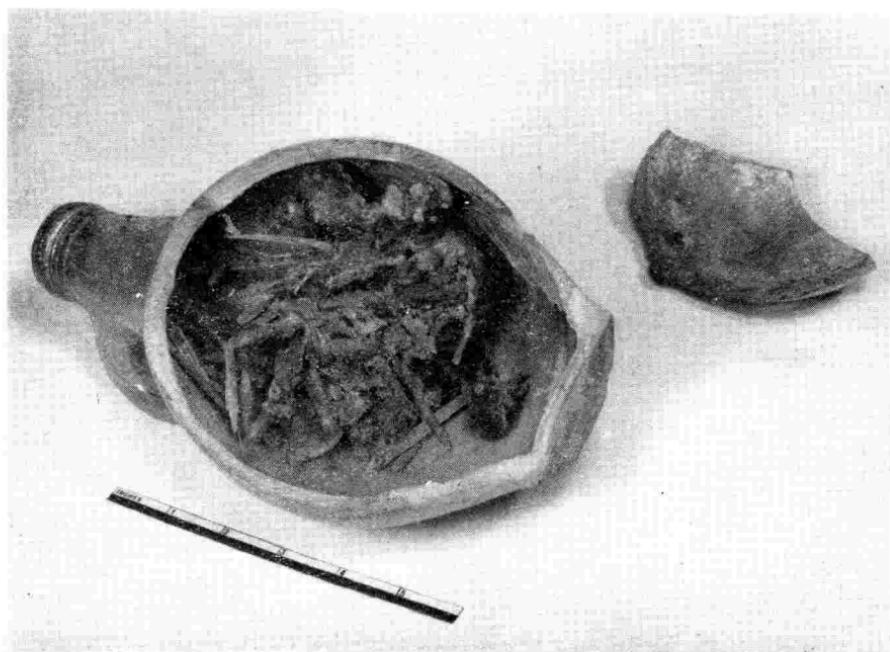
⁴ *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ Cotton Mather, *Late Memorable Providences*, (1691).

PLATE XVI

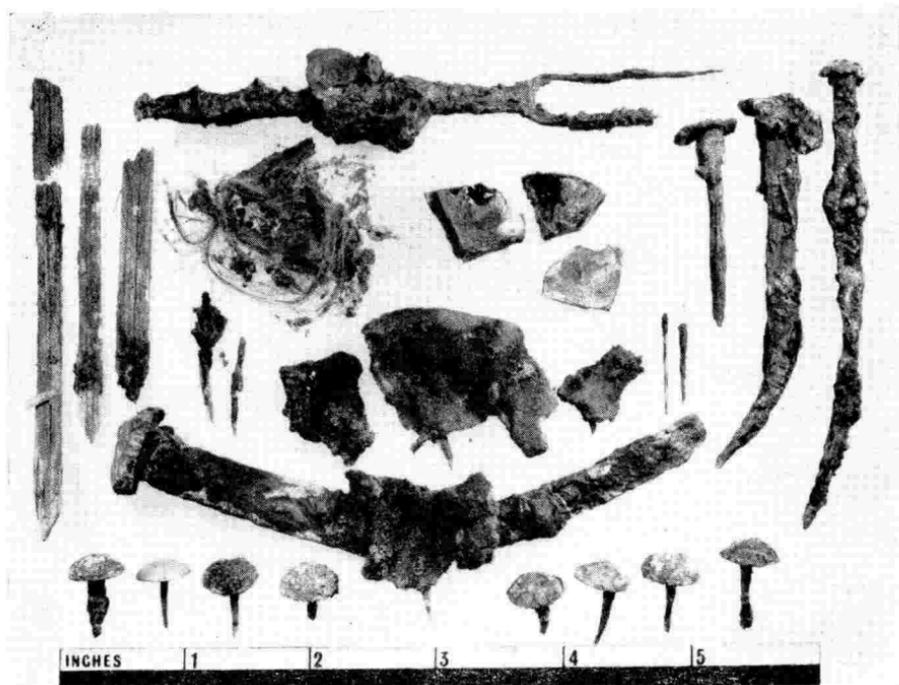


a Ipswich Witch-Bottle (approx. $\frac{1}{2}$)



b Contents

PLATE XVII



a Detail of Contents (Ipswich Bottle)



b Woodbridge Witch-Bottle (approx. 1/4)

took to examine them. A description of the sample and its source is given in the table below on the left, and Dr. Werner's report on the right.

<i>Sample</i>	<i>Report by Dr. Werner</i>
1. A scraping of a red deposit from the inside of the neck of the bottle.	This material appears to be iron rust derived from the nails.
2. A similar scraping from the inside of the body.	This material is also iron rust.
3. A sample from the plug in the neck of the bottle.	A grey earthy deposit containing particles of sand and fragments of rust from the nails. It gives a positive reaction for the presence of phosphate, possibly derived from urine. Might be soil from a soil-closet or midden.
4. A small sample from the corroded mass of contents.	Mass of objects cemented together with iron corrosion includes:— 2 iron nails; 1 drawing-pin; 1 fragment of common glass; A cutting of hair. The red colour of the hair is due to a deposit of iron rust. When this is removed, the natural colour of the hair is seen to be light brown. Microscopical examination showed it was human hair.
5. One of the splinters of wood with shaped end.	The shape of the splinter suggested that it might be a sulphur match, but since no trace of sulphur can be identified on the tip, it is not possible to say whether this splinter was meant to be dipped in sulphur to make a match. It could equally well serve some other purpose, e.g. a tooth-pick.

Dr. Werner's detection of phosphates possibly derived from urine in the earth stopper found in the neck of the bottle is of great interest. He had been asked to look for chemical traces of the

presence of urine, but wrote his comment without being informed that the urine of the supposed victim of witchcraft was perhaps the most important ingredient of the charm that was prepared as a counter-measure against the witch. It is mentioned by at least four 17th century writers who refer to witch-bottles, and has survived in more recent superstitious practice as almost the sole ingredient of the charm.⁶ Other personal belongings of the sufferer, such as hair and nail clippings, were sometimes included; all the indications, both of contemporary records and later traditions, are that the urine was never omitted. The fact that possible traces of urine could only be detected in the earth stopper may perhaps be considered additional evidence that the bottle was inverted. In this position, as the liquid evaporated, a concentration of salts could collect immediately above the stopper and would gradually soak into it in appreciable quantities, leaving barely perceptible traces elsewhere.

In 1957 a 'Bellarmine' bottle (Plate XVII**b**) was found lying on its side, buried at a depth of about 3 feet 6 inches under a road formerly leading to Red Maltings, Woodbridge, now converted for use as a dwelling-house, and the home of Major G. Uloth, who submitted the find to the Ipswich Museum for examination. The bottle, 8 inches in height, with a diameter at its greatest girth of 5 inches, bore a mark of Holmes Type IX,⁷ and a multiple rosette. It was not stoppered when found, and contained seven iron nails, the longest having a length of 4 inches. The finder did not observe any other contents.

Suffolk 'witch-bottles' already described come from Stradbroke⁸ and Coddendam.⁹ It is highly probable that many such bottles had served this purpose, though the significance of the contents, and of the position in which they were found, was not realised at the time.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ M. R. Holmes, *loc. cit.*, pp. 173-179.

⁸ R. Merrifield, *loc. cit.*, p. 8.

⁹ N. Smedley, *Proc. Suff. Inst. Arch.*, xxvi (1954), pp. 229-30.