

Archaeological Leather Group

Newsletter

Number 6 - Spring 1990

Editorial

The main feature of this issue is the enclosed *Guidelines for Dealing with Archaeological Leather*, drawn up by **Quita Mould**, and **Glynis Edwards**, with appendices of portfolio projects on aspects of leather conservation presented as portfolio projects for the University of Durham Diploma in Archaeological Conservation.

The first, by **Liz Brierley**, details the the procedure, with time analysis, of Freeze drying leather in the Ancient Monuments Laboratory.

The second, by **Bridget Ibbs**, assesses the value of established methods of assessing the shrinkage rate of leather during conservation, showing them to be of limited value. Bridget will be publishing this work on the accuracy of measurement, also carried out at the Ancient Monuments Laboratory.

Please give some thought to these important guidelines and send any comments you may have to **Glynis Edwards**, Ancient Monuments Laboratory, H.B.M.C.E., Fortress House, 23 Savile Row, London, W1X 2HE.

Also of interest will be the paper on concealed shoes, by **Denise Dixon-Smith**, based on her Museums' Diploma project.

Denise has resigned as Assistant Keeper of Boots and Shoes, at Northampton Museums, and will be undertaking a Postgraduate Certificate in Education Course from September: our best wishes to Denise for her new career. A successor has yet to be appointed.

Please don't forget to send in details of publications, book reviews, meetings, 'mystery objects', research articles, conservation workshop notes, etc.

Meetings

Sadly, all too few members managed to attend the last meeting in November, at the Walsall Leather Centre. Warm thanks to **Michael Glasson**, curator of the museum, for organizing the day, which was very much appreciated by those present.

Please forward any ideas for venues or topics for future meetings. These should be sent to **Dr. Alison Hems**, Central Museum, Guildhall Road, Northampton, NN1 1DP; ☎ (0604) 34881, ext. 393 (please note change of address and telephone number).

The next two meetings are being planned - details of the next meeting will be sent to you as soon as possible.

New Members

Terje Hofso, Högålidsgatan 40A, 117 30 Stockholm, Sweden.

Christine Howard Davis, Old Fulling Mill Museum, 46 Saddler Street, Durham, DH1 3NU

Changes of Address

S. Winterbottom, Flat 3, 109 Warwick Road, Carlisle, CA1 1JY

J.M.Oetgen, 200 High Street, Arlesey, Bedfordshire, SG15 6TB

Subscriptions

Some members are in arrears for previous years: please telephone or write to the treasurer **Mrs Clare Thomas**, Stillness, Weem, Aberfeldy, Perthshire, PH15 2LD; ☎ (0887) 20551, if you are in any doubt about your position.

Bibliography

Apologies that the 12th - 16th Centuries Bibliography does not accompany this Newsletter. It is well advanced, but gathering together all the information for this period has been quite a task. Please continue to send in contributions for future bibliographies - not just by period, but leather production, shoe making, conservation notes, pictorial sources, collections, specialized artefacts, etc. Also, of course, publications, old or new, for the periods already covered, Prehistoric to 11th Century, to be included as additions.

Publications

Recent Research in Archaeological Footwear

Contents include: *Calceology: a New Hobby: the Drawing and Recording of Archaeological Footwear*, **Olaf Goubitz**; *Practicalities and Pitfalls in the Application of a Standardized System of Conventions to the Drawing of Archaeological Footwear*, **A.D. Hooley**; *Roman Footwear: a Mirror of Fashion and Society*, **Carol van Driel-Murray**; *Aspects of Leather Conservation at York*, **James Spriggs**; *Towards a Standard Shoe Glossary*, **June Swann, M.B.E.**

This publication of 1987 is available, price £3-00 to members of the A.L.G. and the Association of Archaeological Illustrators and Surveyors, £3-50 to non-members, plus 40 pence p&p, within the U.K.; £1-00 by airmail to Europe and by surface mail outside Europe. Please send cheques, payable to 'Archaeological Leather Group', to the treasurer, **Mrs. Clare Thomas**, address as above.

News from the Honourable Cordwainers Company

The Yorktown Shipwreck Project, working on a British supply ship, scuttled prior to Cornwallis' surrender to the allied American and French forces in October 1781, has recovered some 30-40 shoes and fragments. There are both welted and turned shoes. Many had been repaired by civilian sailors.

September Newsletter

Please send contributions for the next newsletter to the Editor, **Diana Friendship-Taylor**, Central Museum, Guildhall Road, Northampton, NN1 1DP; ☎ (0604) 34881 ext. 405, by 1 August, please.

Thanks again to **Tim Padley** and his desk-top publishing for this finished product.

Concealed Shoes

Denise Dixon-Smith

The practice of deliberately concealing shoes in buildings is probably the most common superstitious practice of the post-mediaeval period. The earliest known shoe concealment dates to the 13th Century, and the superstition reached its height in the 19th Century, with about 45% of known concealments dating to that century.

There is no utilitarian reason for this practice, yet all the shoes are in inaccessible places, often necessitating building work for them to be hidden. Examples are usually discovered when people start repairing or renovating old houses. The most common places are chimneys, walls, under floorboards, and in roofs. Other hiding places are bricked-up ovens, around doors, windows and staircases. One reason for hiding shoes in chimneys and around doors may have been because these were 'openings' where evil spirits could enter the home and the shoe, as a good luck symbol, should warn them off. The high number of

shoes hidden in chimneys and ovens, together representing over a quarter of concealments, can be attributed to the fact that these were central places in the home, providing warmth and used for cooking food. Therefore it was important to protect them.

There are various reasons why shoes should be chosen as a good luck symbol. One can draw parallels with earlier practices in trying to ascertain why people hid shoes. The Romans were known to have hidden neolithic axes in roofs to ward off lightning. Merrifield has given an example of this occurring in England at a Roman villa in Beddington, Surrey (1987, 10). As nearly one fifth of concealed shoes are found in roofs, it could be a variation of the earlier custom, with the original reason having been lost in time.

Almost without exception, the hidden shoes have been well worn, often beyond repair. This is almost certainly an important part of the custom. Unlike other items of clothing, shoes retain the shape of the wearer's body - showing the foot shape, the fit of the shoe, and even foot deformities. Because of this, many people think that shoes contain animism, or the spirit of the wearer. Therefore, one can see why the custom grew around shoes.

Men's, women's, and children's shoes are all represented, but it is significant that at least half are children's [one-fifth are men's, and nearly a third are women's, but some examples could not be placed definitely in any category because of condition, or insufficient information]. The owner of a mid 19th century child's shoe found in a house in Montrose said it had been the custom for Montrose women to put the first shoes of a baby, once worn, in the roof as a luck token. Certainly, women often keep a baby's first shoes for sentimental reasons, and this probably accounts for the high number of smaller size children's shoes found hidden.

There have been some suggestions that hiding shoes may have links with old fertility customs. For example, in Lancashire an old custom called 'smickling' involved young, childless, married women trying on the shoes of a friend who had just had a baby, in the belief that they would quickly become pregnant afterwards. It may be that these were then the type of shoes that were hidden.

For most people, for much of this century and in previous centuries, shoes were the most expensive item of clothing and were made to last a long time. Concealed shoes are usually heavily worn and

often show evidence of multiple repairs. Those who could not afford them went barefoot. Often those of the working classes that did buy shoes did not wear them all the time. In living memory, children have walked to school barefoot, only wearing their shoes in the classroom and at church, in order to make them last. It is significant that nearly all concealed shoes are working class wear, probably kept hidden because they were highly valued. [This is also important to those of us who study old shoes, since working class shoes so rarely survive].

Shoes are often found with other objects. Just as the shoes are heavily worn, the objects found with them are usually damaged. For example, a shoe found in Bucknall, Shropshire, had with it a broken knife, spoon, and incomplete purse, along with some chicken bones. Such incidences suggest shoes being used as more than a luck token, appearing more like a sacrificial practice, especially when animal bones are included. The well known example at the Museum of London, of shoes being concealed with apparently live chickens, suggests more malevolent connotations to the practice. Of the animal bones found with shoes, nearly all are from chickens, but some cat remains have also been hidden with shoes, for example at Lindley, in Yorkshire. Cats are traditionally associated with witches as their 'familiars' and there may be magical elements to the concealed shoe practice. The finder of one shoe in Devon, said that his elderly father said locally the hiding of shoes in buildings was thought to 'have something to do with "witching"'.

Some shoes themselves suggest ritualistic practices. A pair found in Oxfordshire had a cross cut into the vamp of one shoe and a symbol (I have yet to ascertain its meaning) cut into the other vamp.

In most examples the concealment of shoes seems to be as a luck token. Some concealments seem to have more malevolent or magical connotations. Certainly, it is an interesting practice which provides a wealth of information about human behaviour and superstition. For those of us who are interested in old shoes, the shoes themselves are valuable for the evidence they provide (with the added bonus that concealed shoes present virtually no conservation problems). So perhaps we ought to go away and hide a few ourselves to provide discussion for the A.L.G. meetings of the future!

The information and figures in this article were

gathered together as part of a project undertaken for the University of Leicester Department of Museum Studies. The figures were based on concealed shoe information held in Northampton Museum and examples known from other museums.

Bibliography

Merrifield, Ralph, 1987, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, London.

... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...

... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...

... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...

... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...

... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...

... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...
... of the ... and ...